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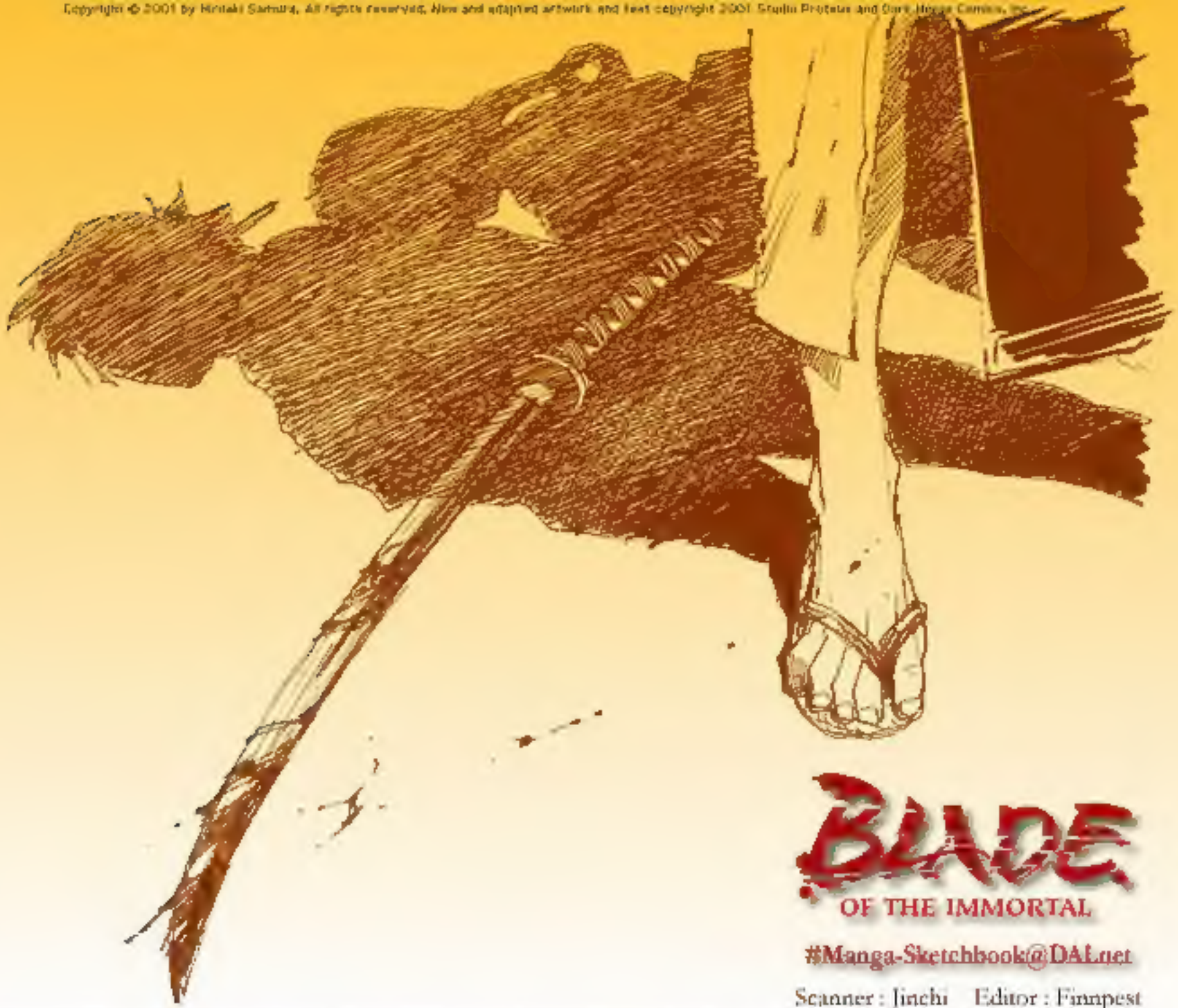


BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

#Manga-Sketchbook@DALnet

Scanner : Jinchi Editor : Finnpest

無限の住人

HIROAKI SAMURA

BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

Secrets

BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

Secrets

BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

art and story
HIROAKI SAMURA

translation
Dana Lewis & Toren Smith

lettering and retouch
Tomoko Saito

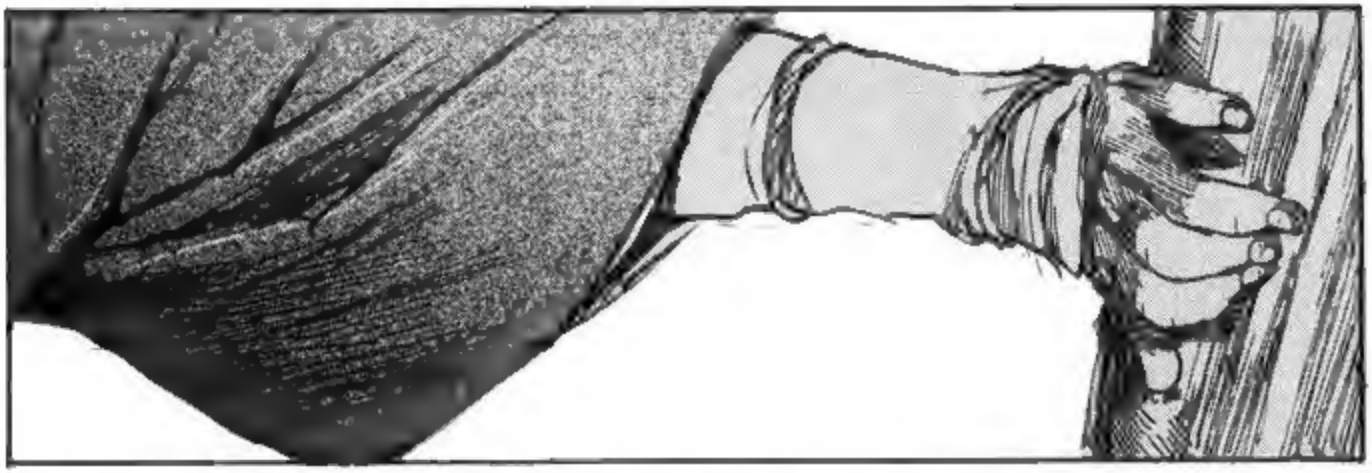
Secrets

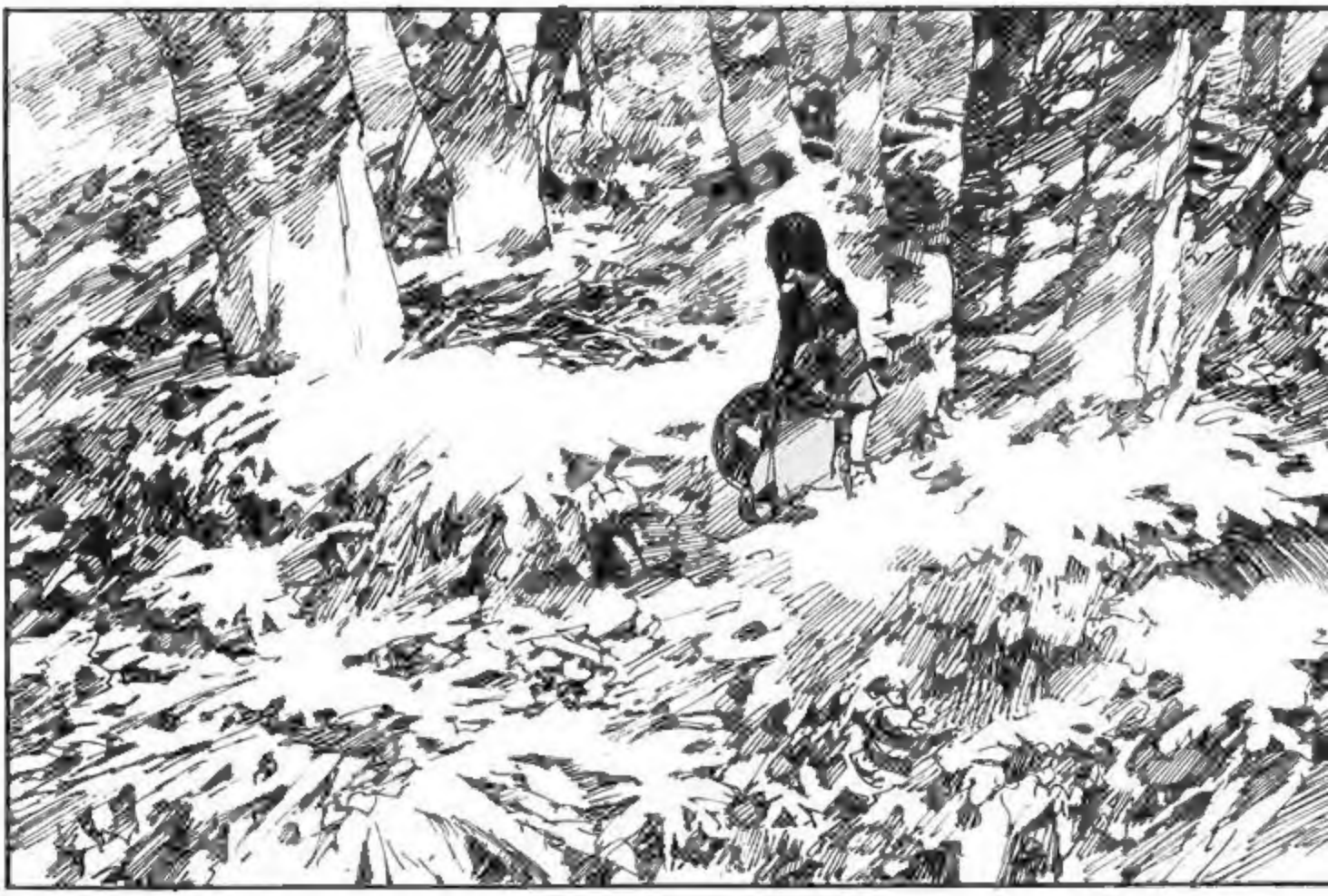
DARK HORSE COMICS®

SECRETS
Part 1

KAGA

I SHOULD HAVE ASKED BACK AT THAT FARM-HOUSE...
HMM... THAT'S PROBABLY THE "PATH TO THE SHRINE."
!!





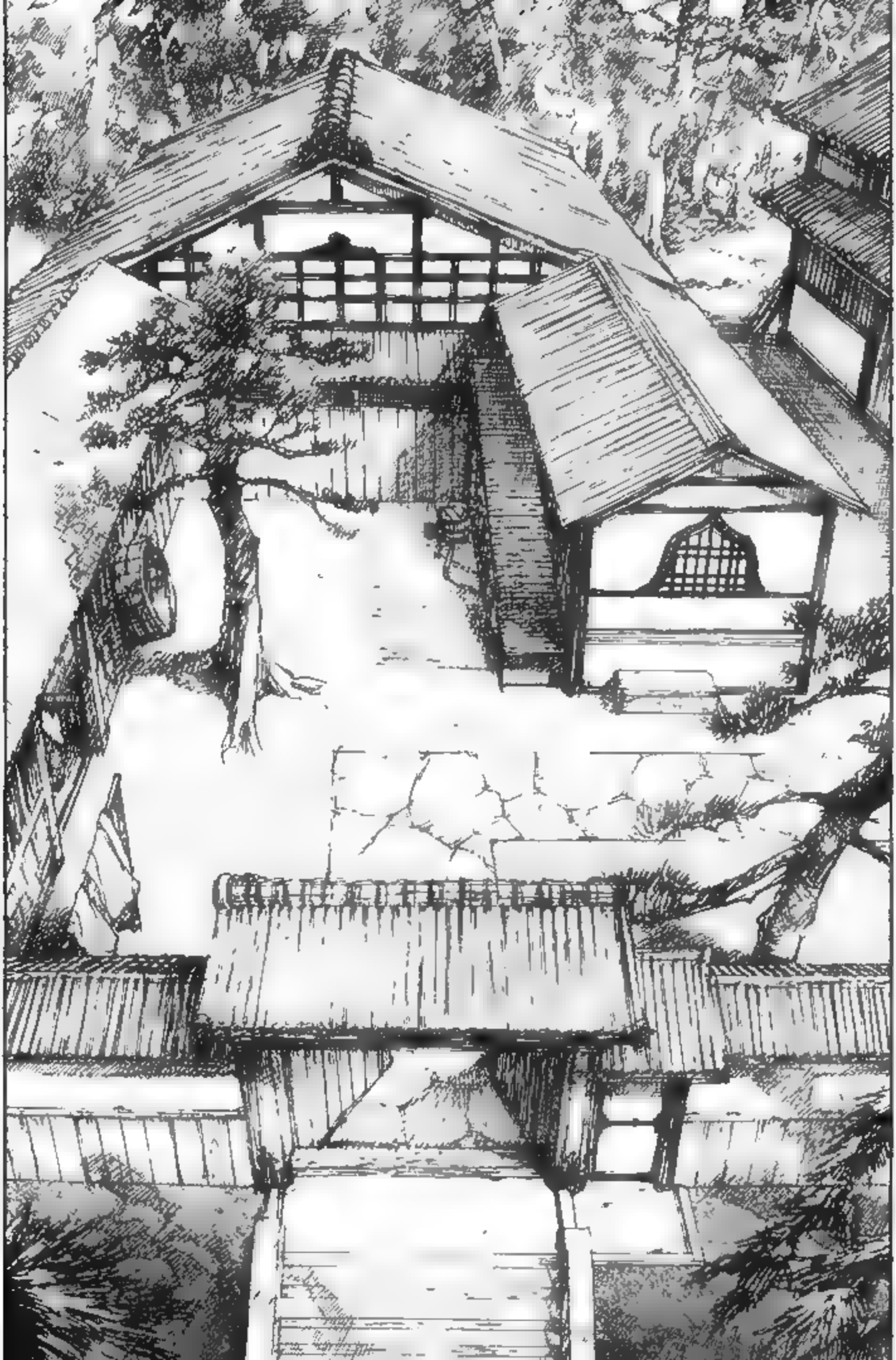
MAYBE IT'S JUST ME, BUT...
.....

THE AIR OF EARLY AUTUMN...
SO GENTLE ON THE SKIN...
DO YOU LIVE NEAR HERE?
YES... YOU MIGHT SAY.
GOOD. PERHAPS YOU CAN HELP ME, THEN.

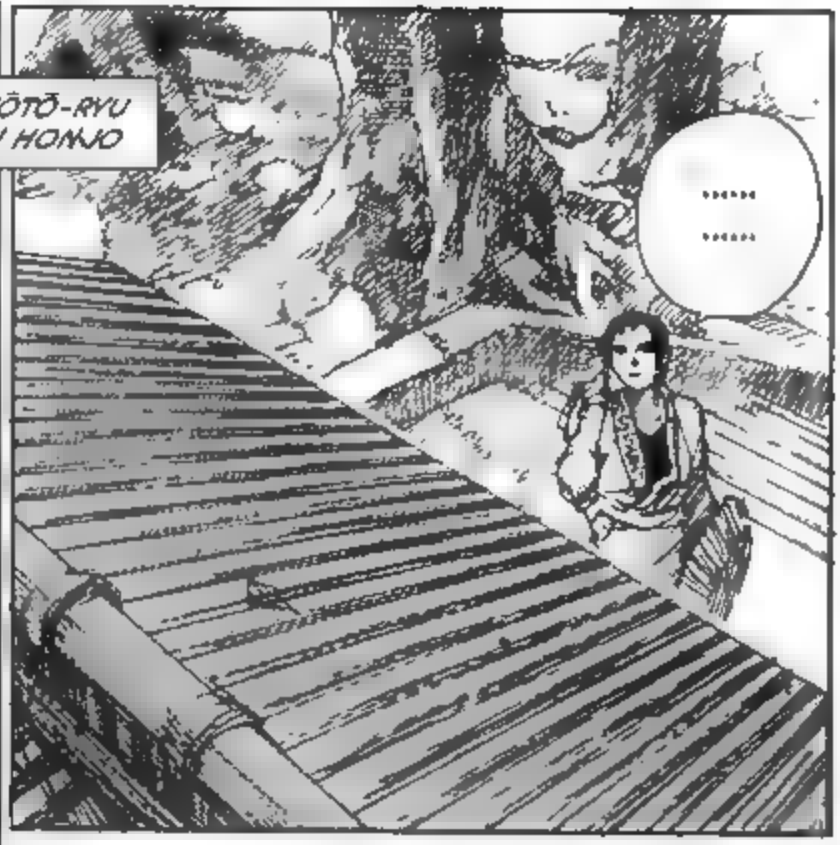
I'M HERE TO VISIT A DŌJŌ-- THE SHINGYŌTŌ-RYŪ SHINANJO.
COULD YOU TELL ME IF THERE IS ANY WAY OTHER THAN THIS ROAD I'M ON?
FOR YOU, THERE IS NO OTHER WAY.
YOU MUST CONTINUE ON YOUR PATH.
STAY ON THE TRAIL TO THE SHRINE...
...AND CLIMB THE TWO HUNDRED STEPS.
IT LOOKS LIKE A TEMPLE, BUT...
...THAT IS THE DŌJŌ YOU SEEK.
.....
.....
THANKS.

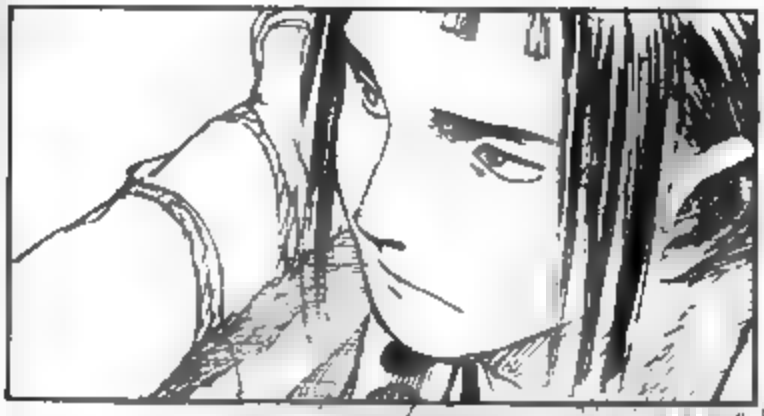
.....
OH... BY THE WAY...
THE HILLS OF KAGA?
THEY'RE SOMETIMES CRUEL TO THOSE FROM OUTSIDE.
YES...?

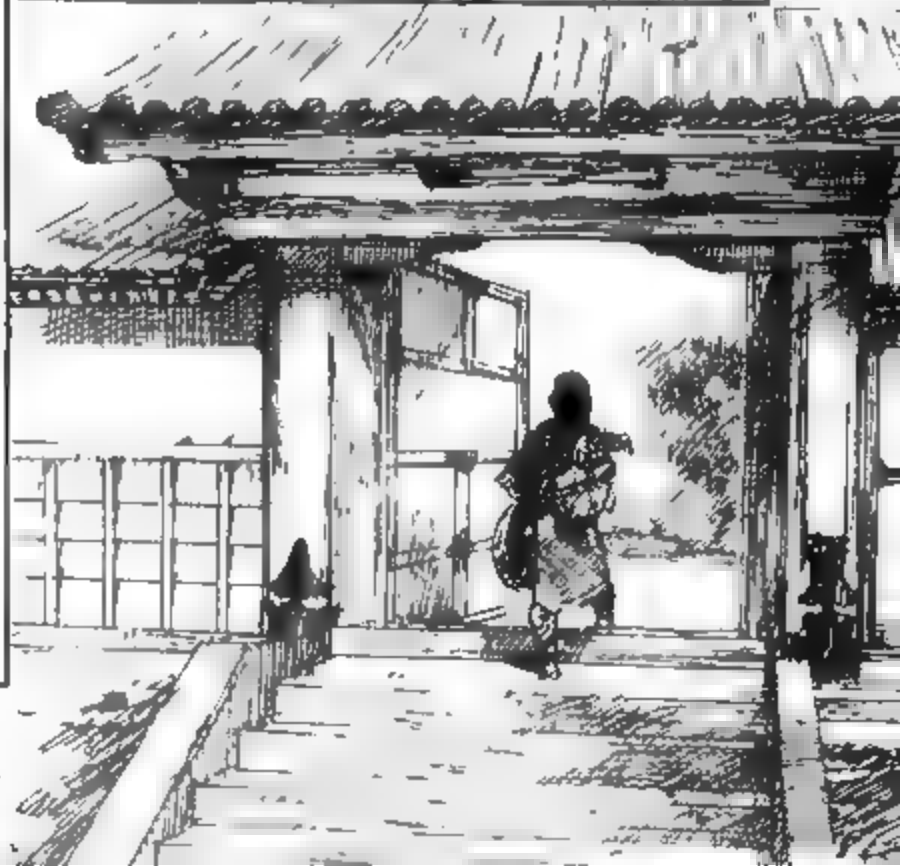
IF YOU'RE A TRAVELER... DO BE CAREFUL.
IF YOU WISH TO FIND YOUR WAY BACK HOME.
.....
.....
I WON'T FORGET THAT.

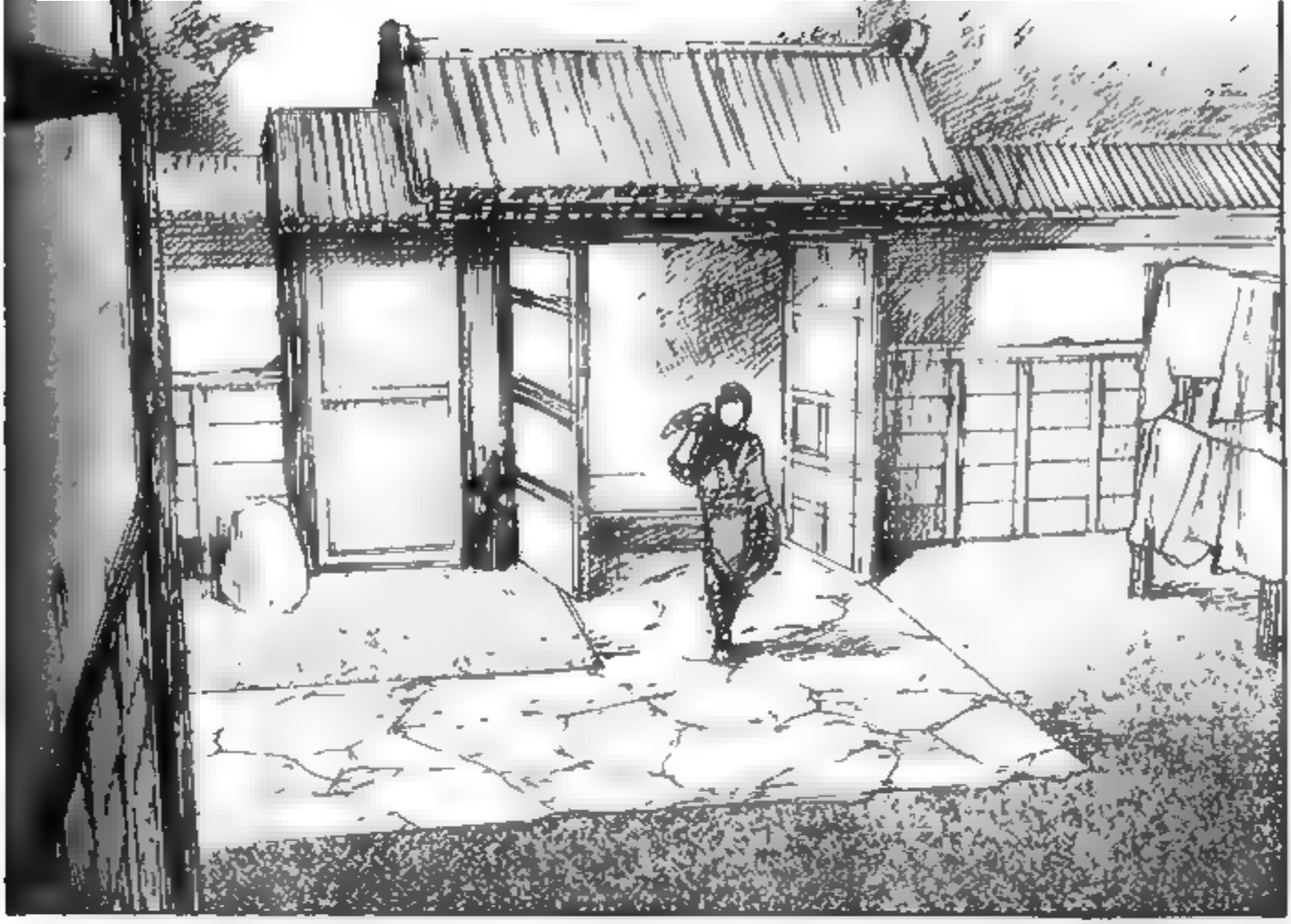


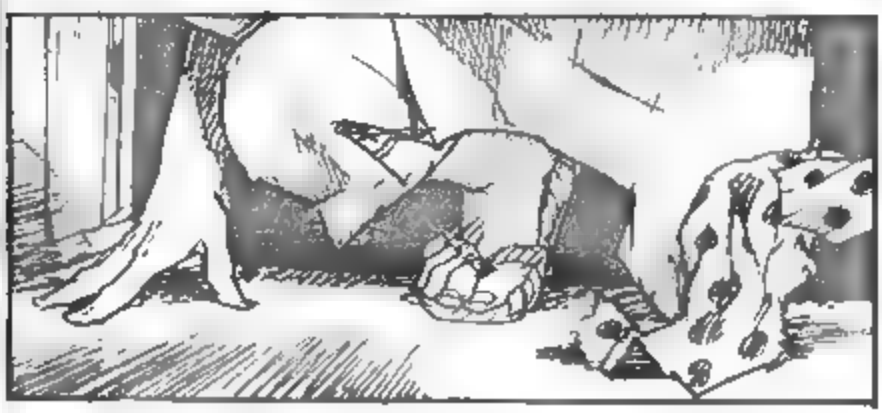
心形唐流指南本所
SHINGYŌTŌ-RYU
SHINAN HONJO





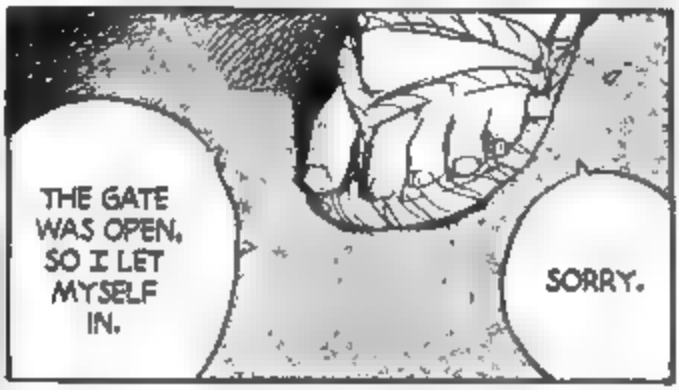






uh...
EXCUSE ME?!
CAN I, uh... HELP YOU?

.....
.....

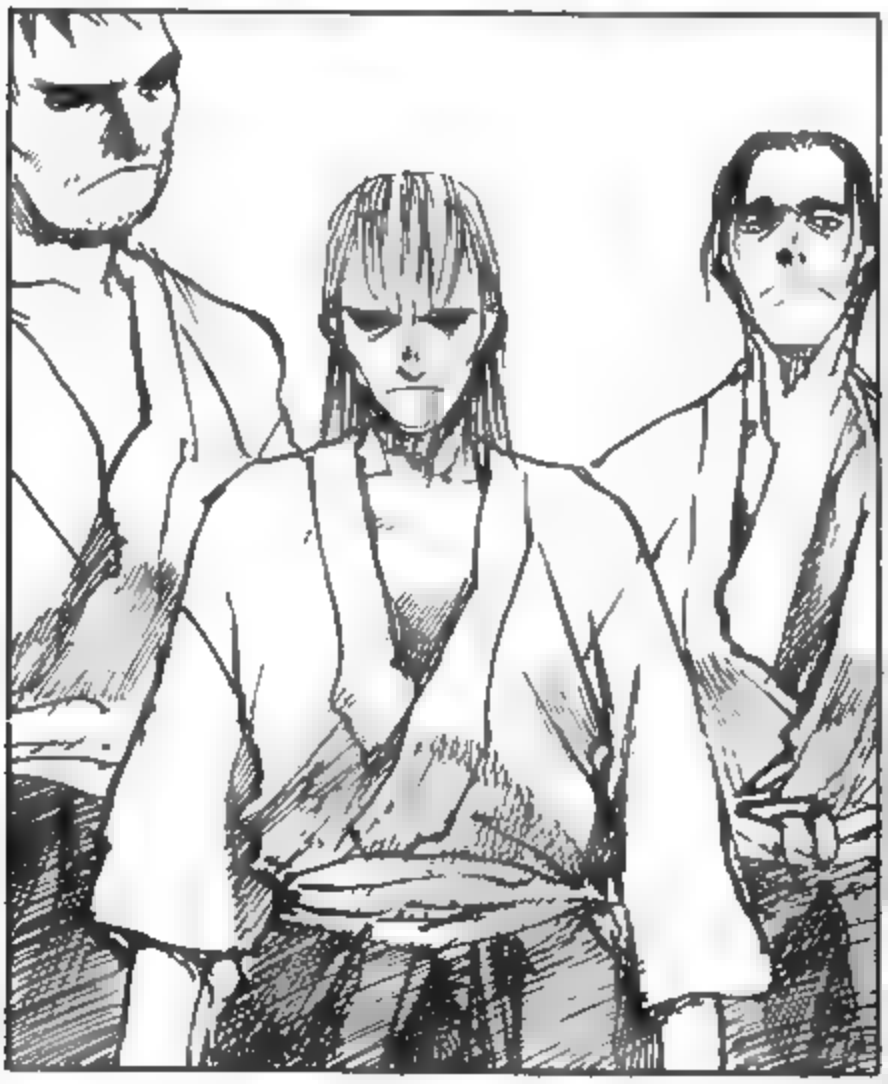

THE GATE WAS OPEN, SO I LET MYSELF IN.
SORRY.

I AM ANOTSU KAGEHISA, LEADER OF THE ITTŌ-RYŪ.
PLEASE TELL IBANE-DONO I'VE COME TO SPEAK WITH HIM.

EH?!
THEN YOU'RE...?!

.....!
WELL? IS IBANE-DONO HERE?

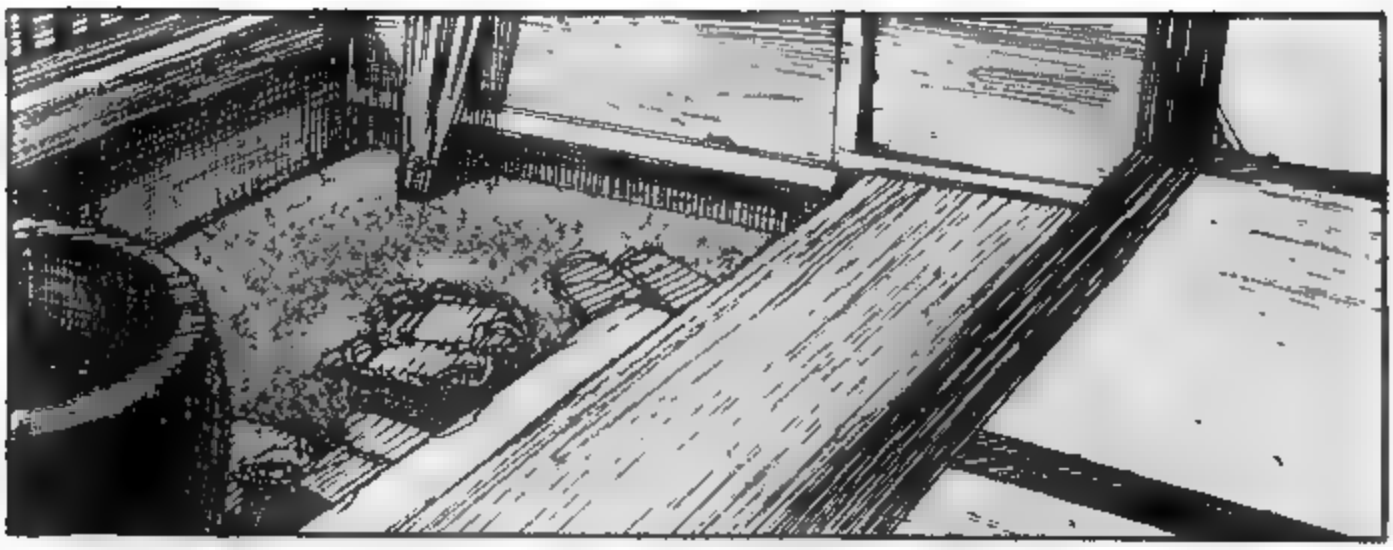
W-WAIT
RIGHT
HERE,
PLEASE!
BACK
IN A
SEC!
whew

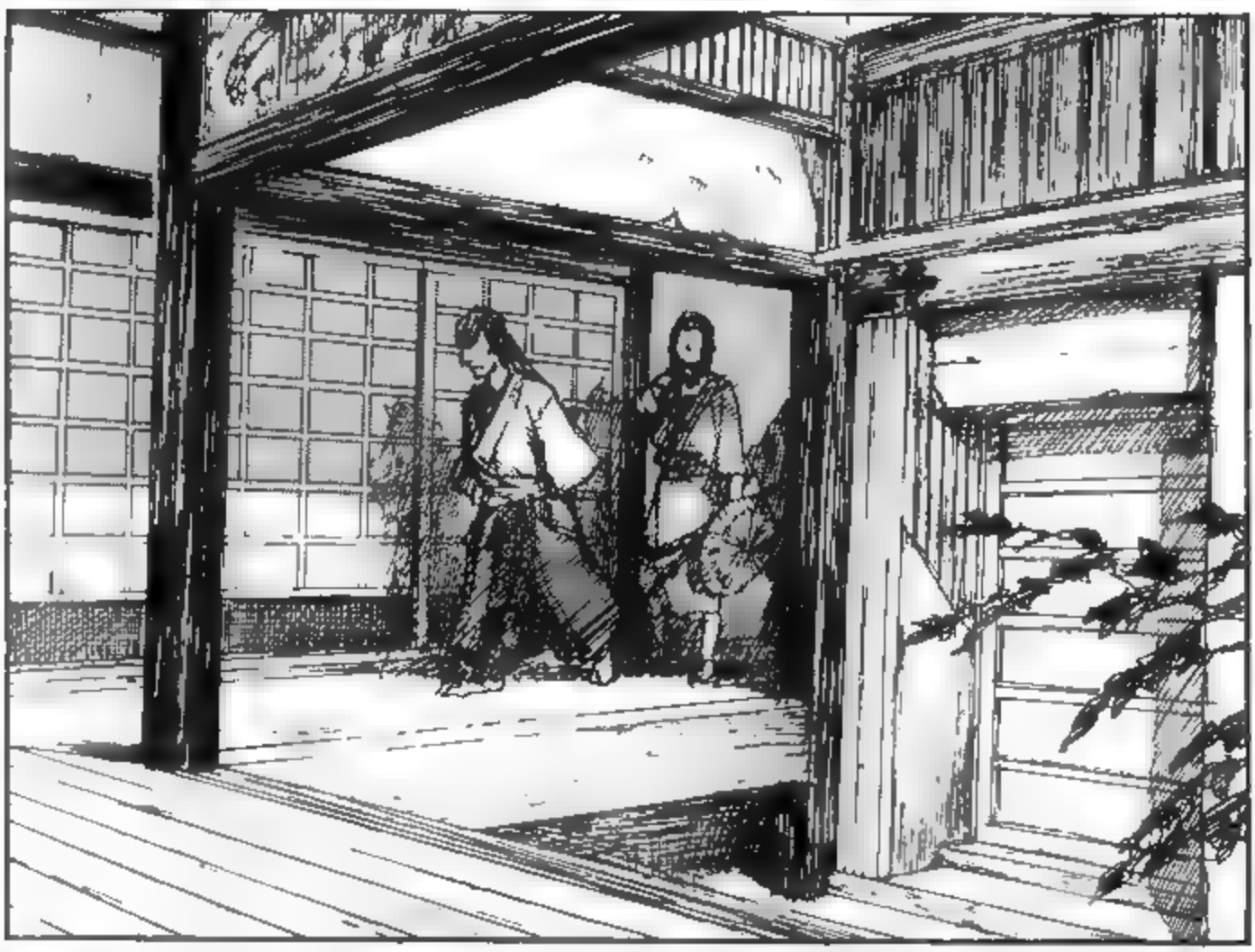


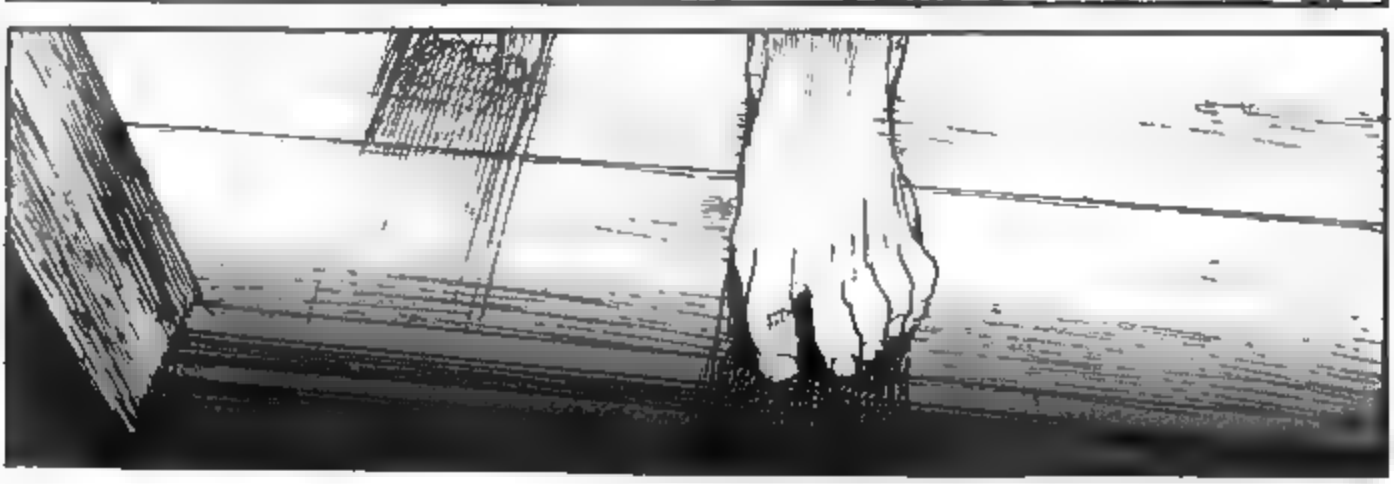
A-
ANOTSU...
K-KAGE-
HISA...?

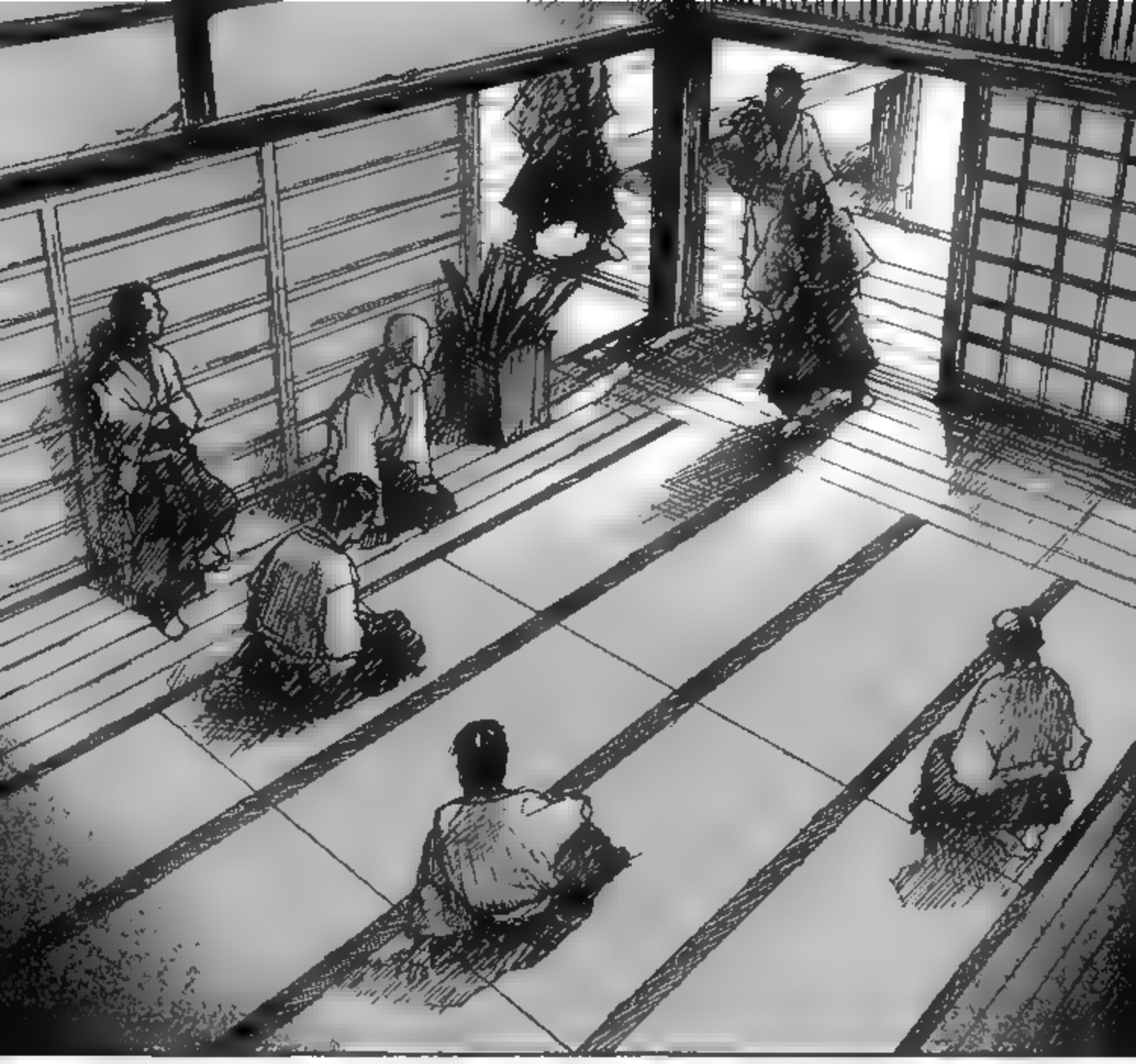
HUH...? THIS LITTLE WIMP?
SHIT, WE GOT COCK-ROACHES HERE THAT COULD KICK HIS ASS.
S-SKILL AND SIZE... AREN'T THE S-SAME.
.....
.....
STRANGE.
I TOLD HIM I WAS HERE TO SEE IBANE-DONO.
TH-THE KID?
WE TOLD H-HIM TO TELL US F-FIRST.

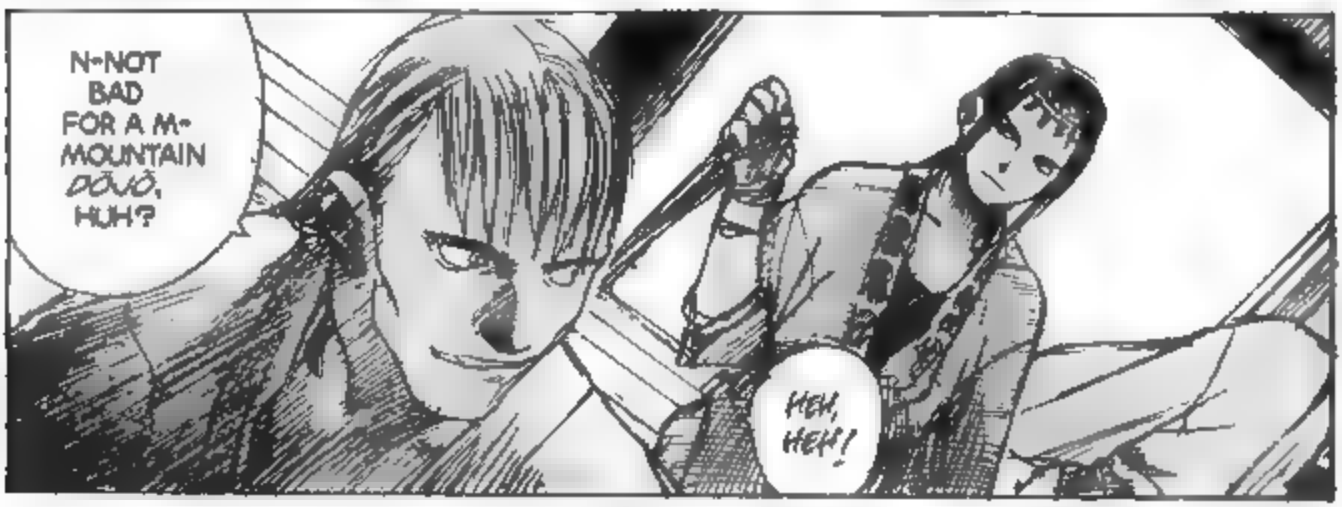
THE SENSEI'S G-GONE... ON BUSINESS.
B-BUT HE'LL BE BACK SOON.
FIRST, WE W-WANT TO TALK.
JUST YOU AND US. ALONE.
OKAY... R-RIGHT...
THIS P-PLACE IS NO GOOD.
C--
COME ON!

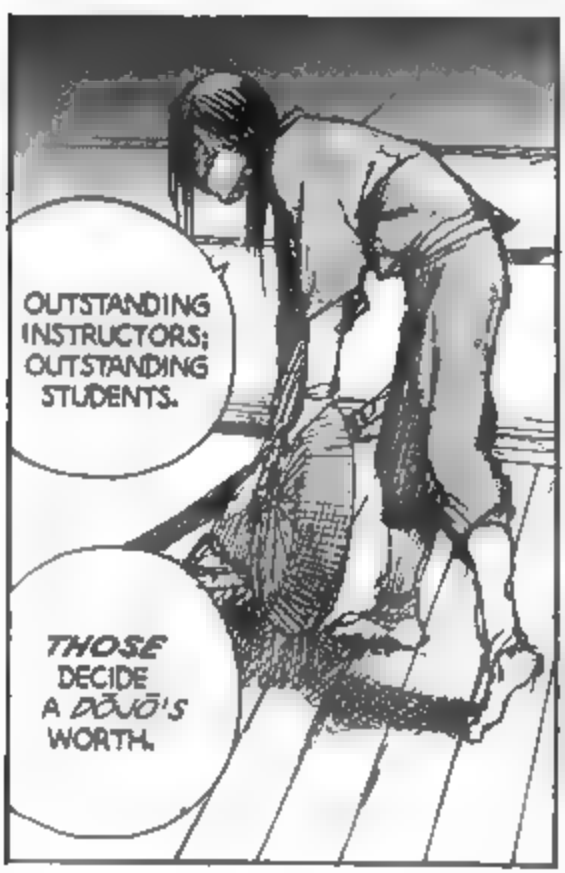









N-NOT BAD FOR A M-MOUNTAIN DŌJŌ, HUH?
HEH, HEH!

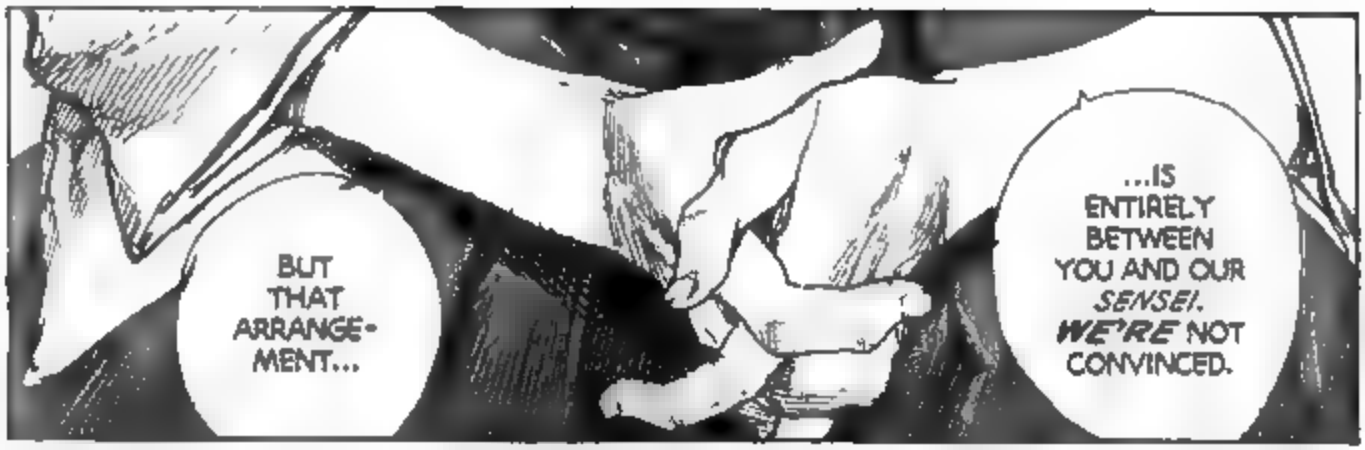

OUTSTANDING INSTRUCTORS; OUTSTANDING STUDENTS.
THOSE DECIDE A DŌJŌ'S WORTH.

HUH!

H-
HERE!
FWAP
ALL
TH-
THESE...
...WIT-
NESSES.
GOOD
ENOUGH?

NOW... F- FIGHT!
WITH M-ME!
WHAT IS THIS?
.....
.....
JUST WHAT IT S- SOUNDS LIKE.
W-WE HEAR THAT, IN EDO...
...P-PEOPLE PISS THEM- SELVES AT THE N-NAME OF THE ITTŌ-RYŪ.
S-SO... WE WANT YOU T-TO SHOW US WHY!
sigh...
TO BE GREETED WITH SOME...
...SOME BARROOM BRAWL, WHEN I'M STILL TIRED FROM THE ROAD...

HUH! Y-YOU GOT ANY SKILL OTHER THAN M-MAKING LAME EXCUSES?!
ANOTSU-SAN.
I KNOW IT'S ANNOYING, BUT... PLEASE.
CAN'T YOU HELP OUT HERE A BIT?
OUR SENSEI, IBANE KENSHŪ...
...INSTEAD OF CHOOSING A SUCCESSOR FROM AMONG US, HE'S PLANNING TO PUT THE WHOLE DŌJŌ UNDER THE ITTŌ-RYŪ.
BUT OF COURSE YOU KNOW THAT.
AFTER ALL, THAT'S WHAT YOU CAME ALL THIS WAY FOR.


BUT THAT ARRANGE-MENT...
...IS ENTIRELY BETWEEN YOU AND OUR SENSEI. WE'RE NOT CONVINCED.

HELL... TO TELL THE TRUTH, NO ONE HERE WANTS TO KNUCKLE UNDER TO SOME...
...YOUNG OUTSIDER.

YOU'VE GOT A DUTY TO SHOW US--
--HAVE YOU GOT WHAT IT TAKES TO LEAD... OR NOT?

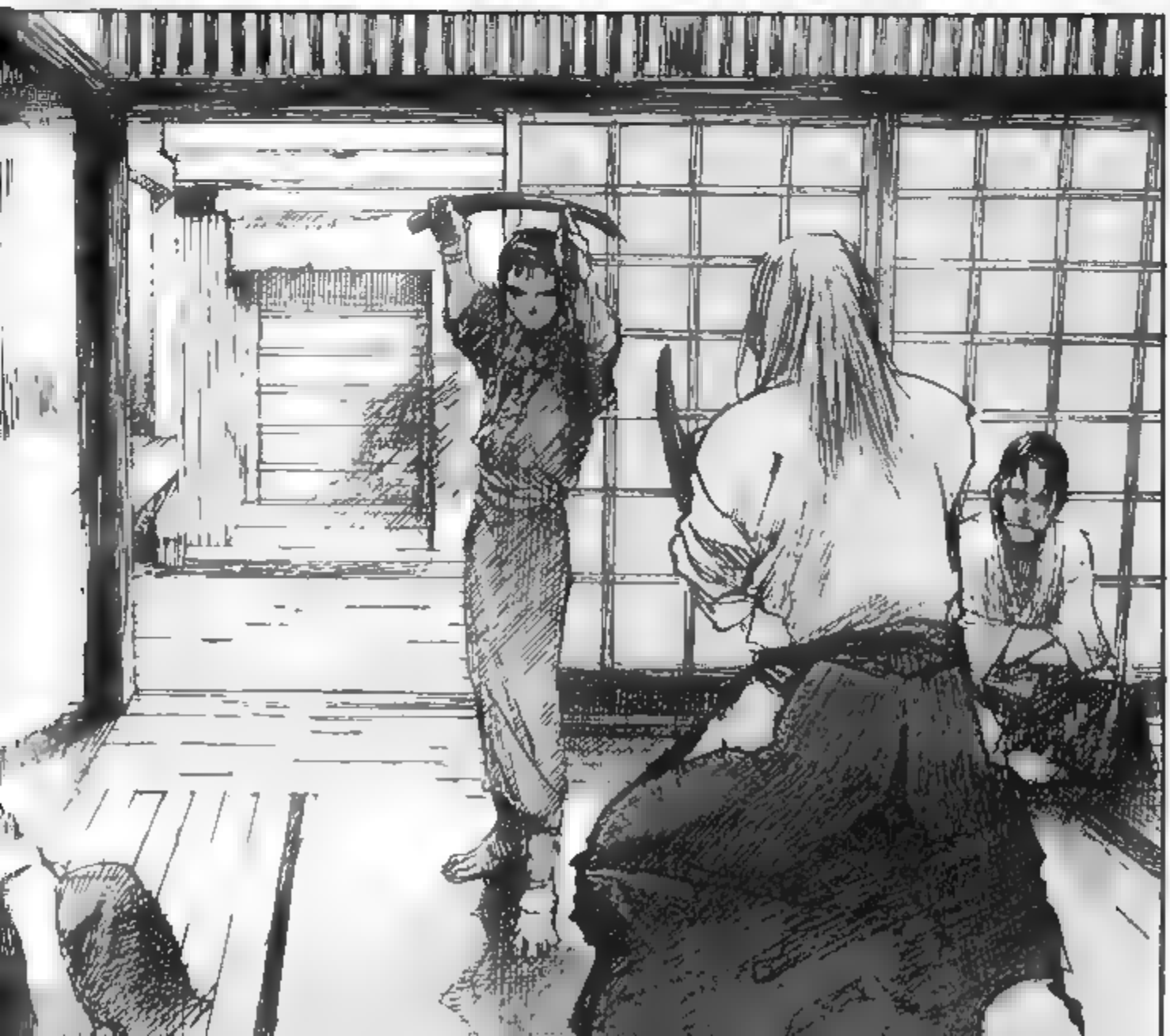
SO-- SHOW EVERY-ONE HERE.
RIGHT NOW.

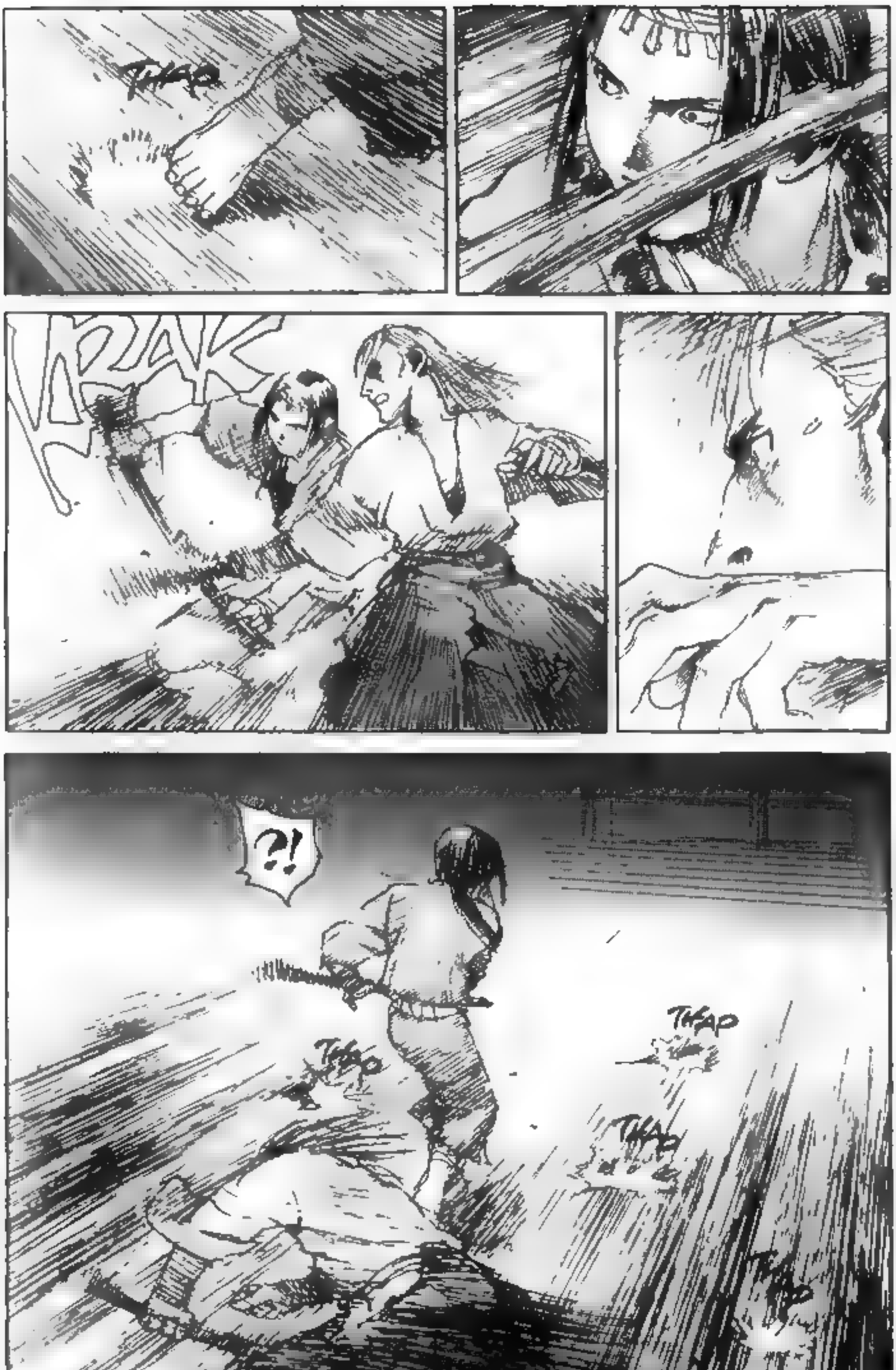
Y-
YEAH!
COME
ON!
MISTER
ANOTSU
K-KAGEHISA
OF THE
ITTŌ-RYŪ!
CHAK
FWAK

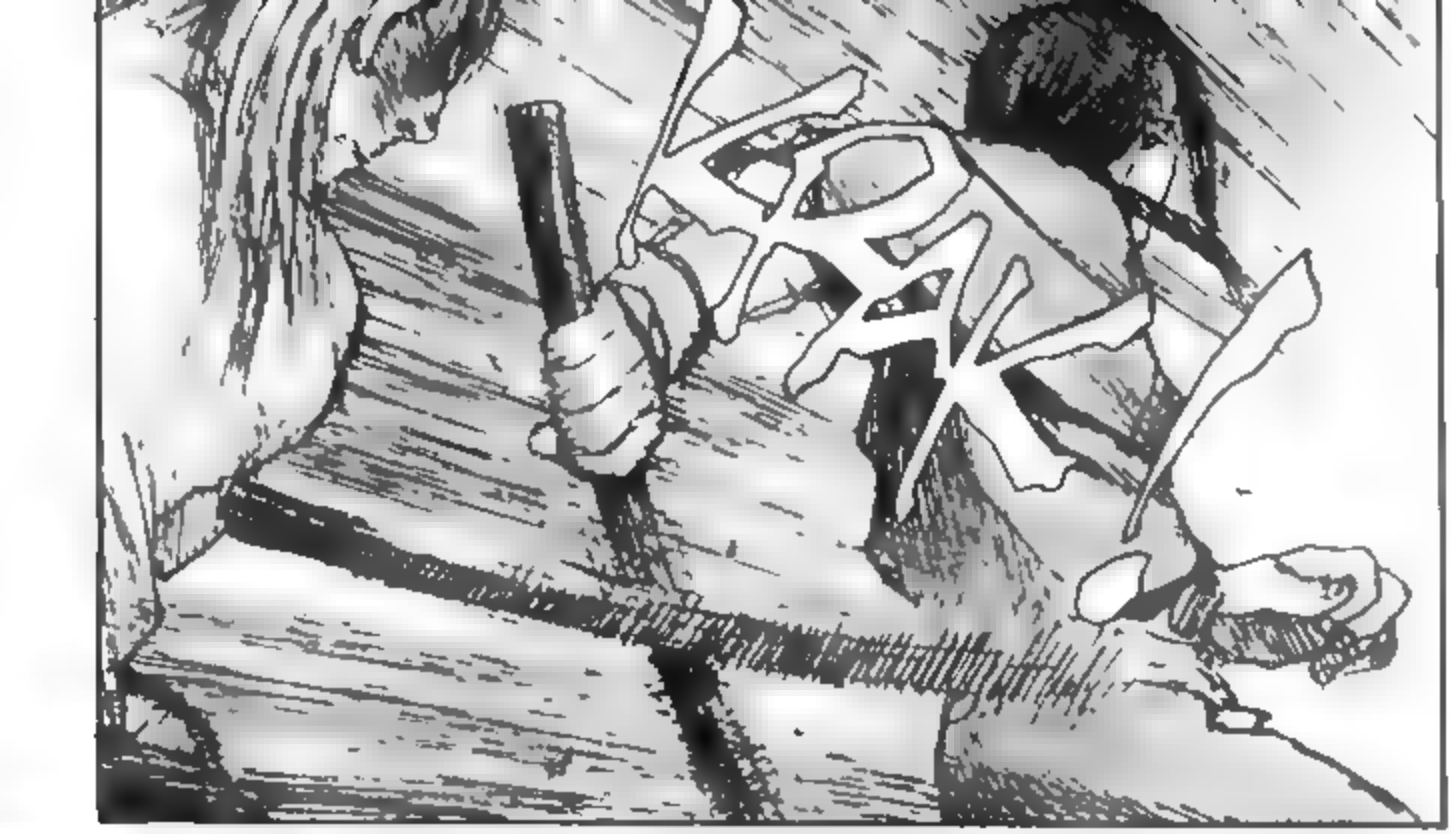
SECRETS
Part 2

hhhhhhhhhhhhhff

AAAAAAA




THAP
KRAK
?!
THAP
THAP
THAP


KAK

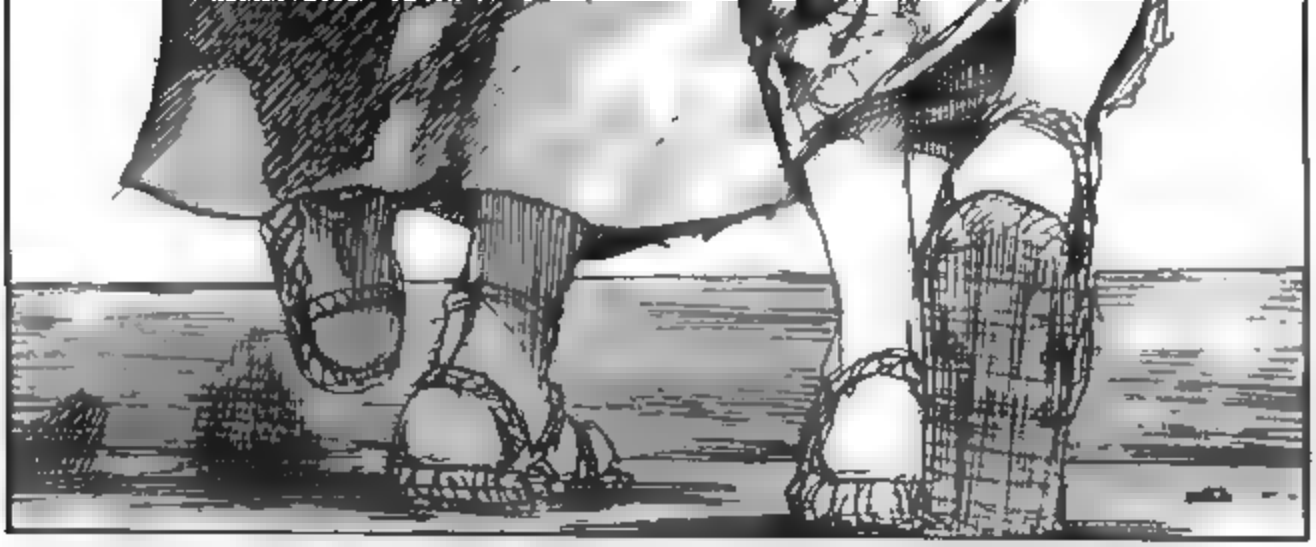
.....
.....
.....!

?!

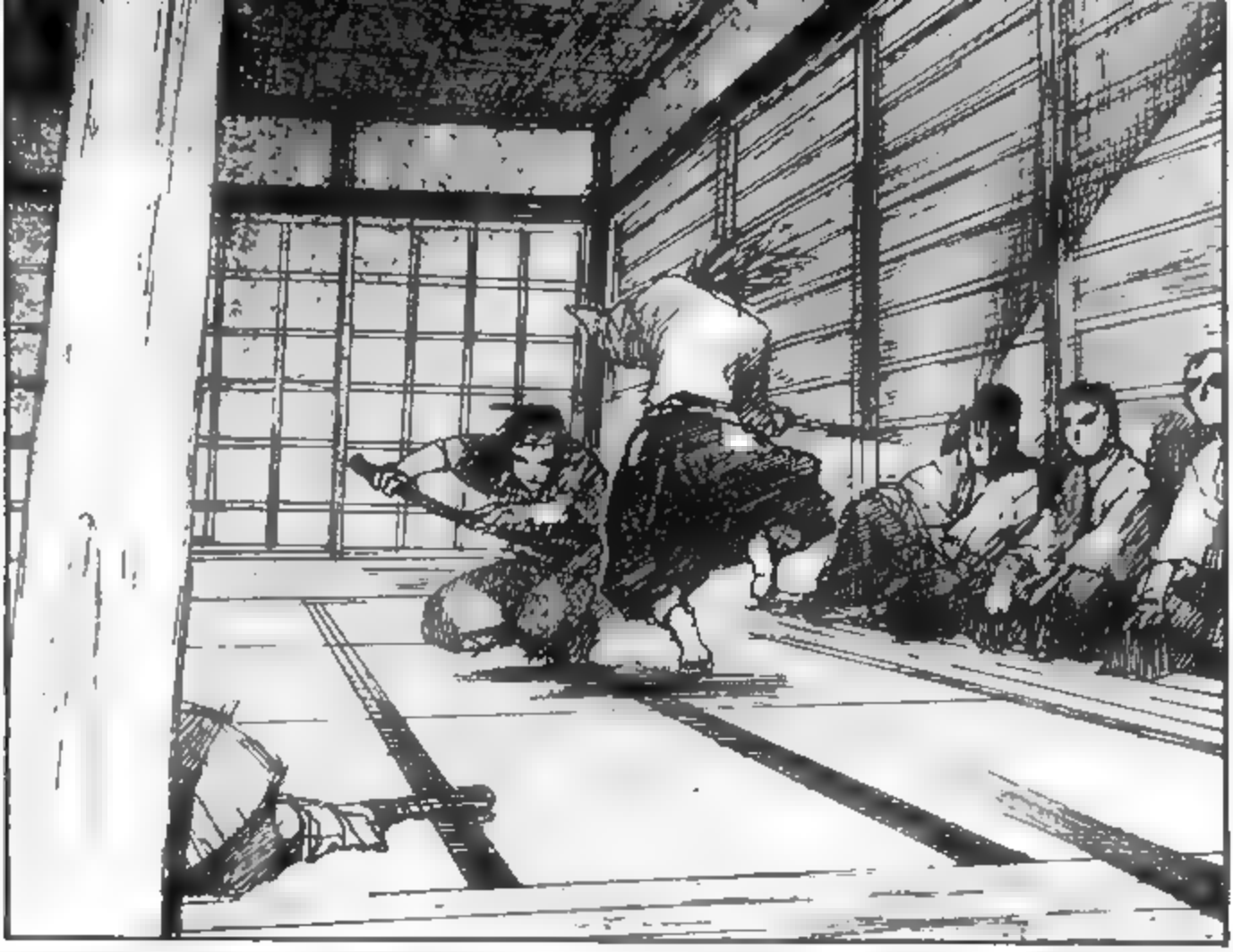
KAK-KA-KA-KAK!
UHHH!!
YOU BA--

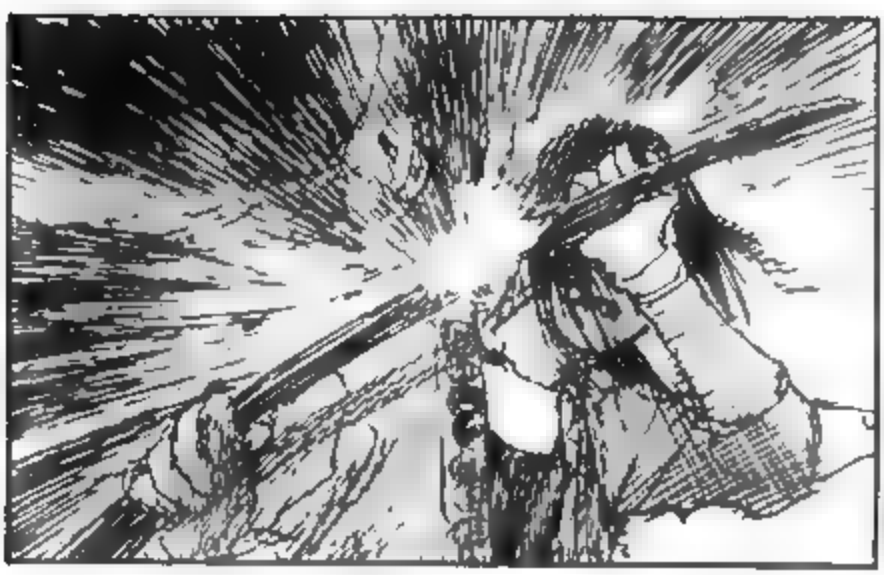
ONE PASS... TWO PASSES... RAPPING SWORDS...
ENOUGH PRAC-TICE!
ONE STROKE! AS THE FALCON TAKES ITS PREY!
DON'T SHAME YOUR MASTER-- GIVE IT EVERYTHING YOU'VE GOT!
.....
.....
.....
!
SNAK

D-DON'T SAY IT'S C-COWARD-LY...
...TO KICK!
WHAT-EVER WORKS!
HMM... REALLY... .....
FWO

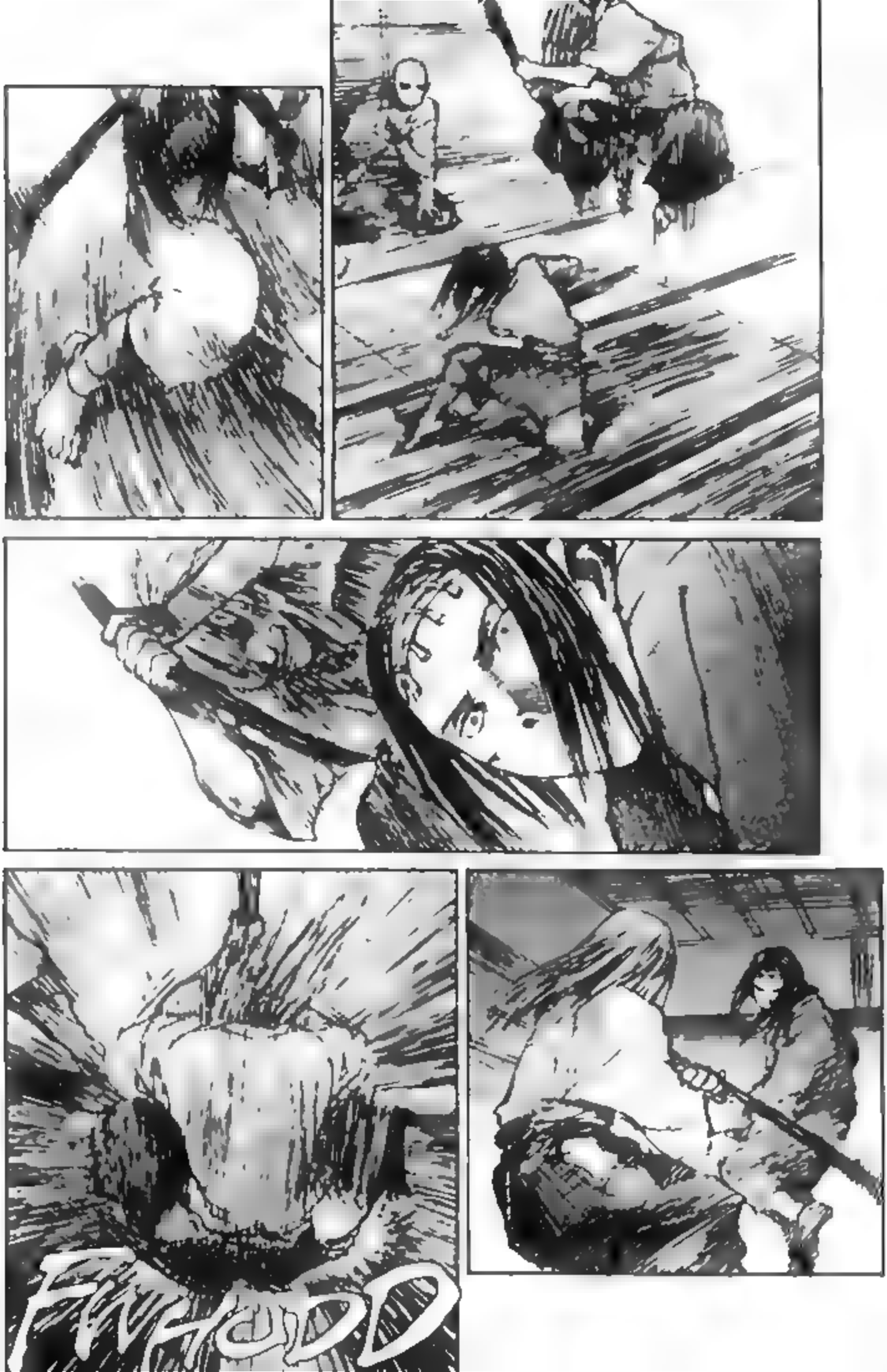


WHAT THE HELL IS THAT RACKET?





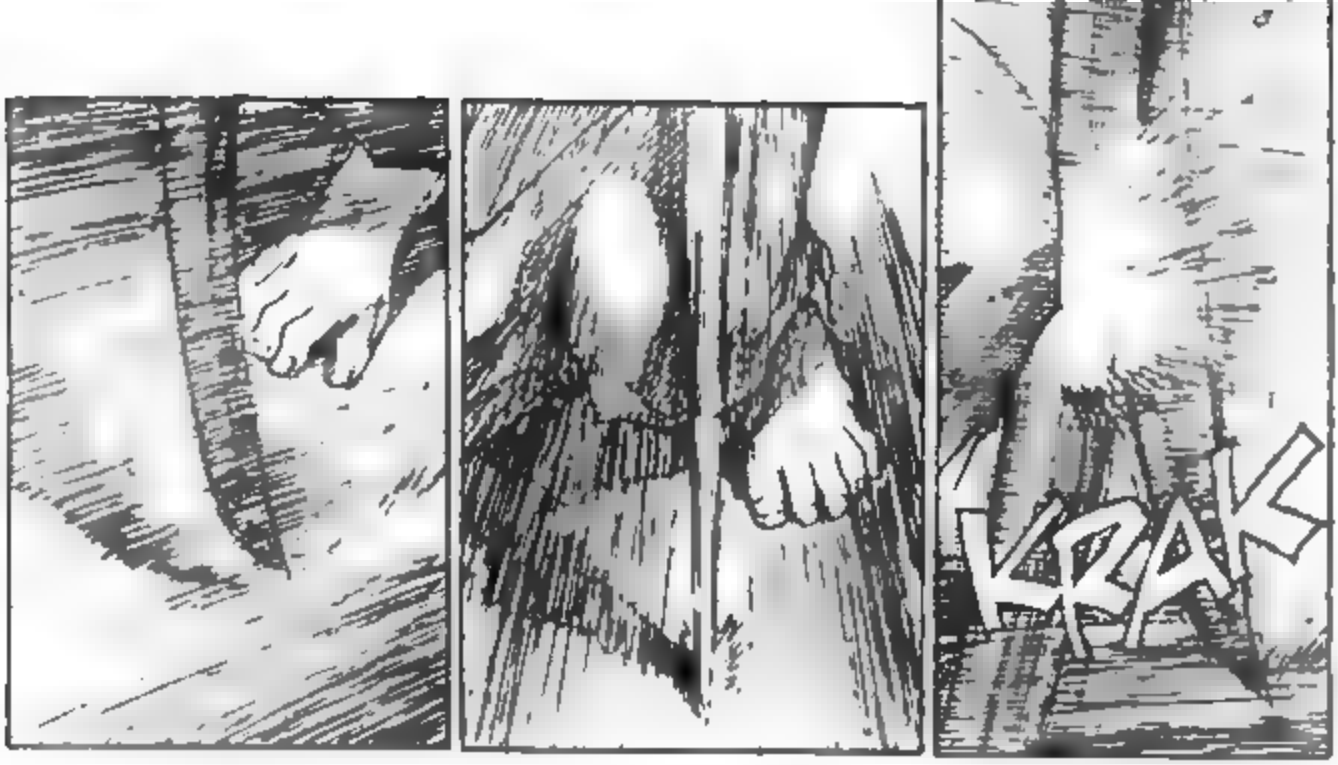
TKAD

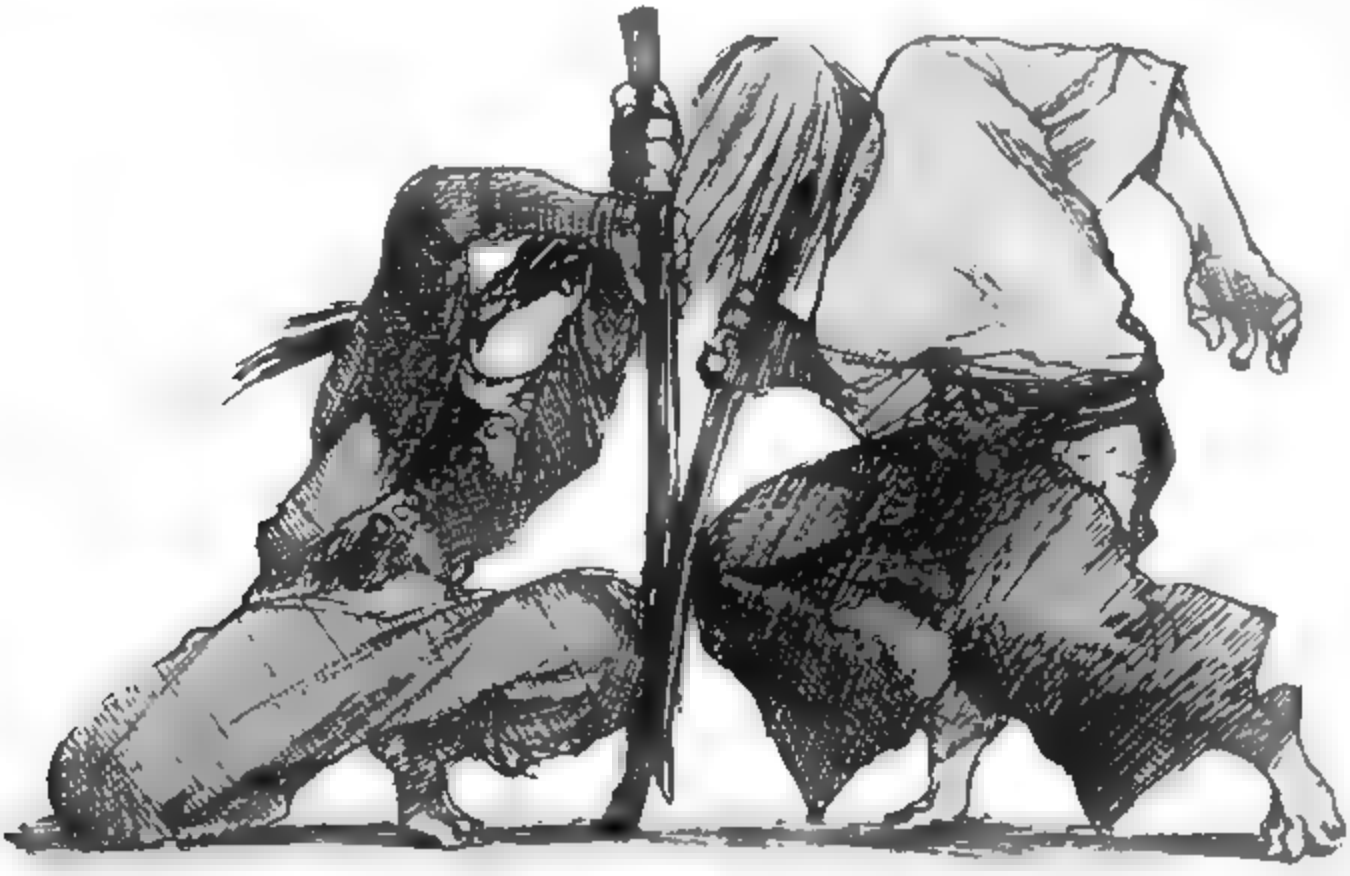

FINDED

HYAA!

KRASH!

D-DIE...!

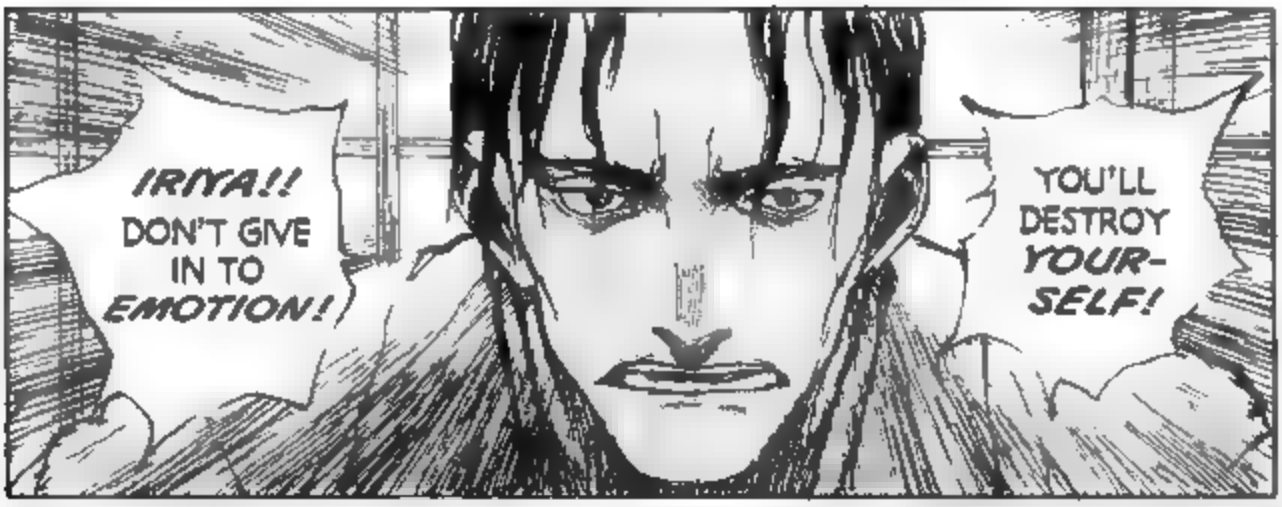

KRAK



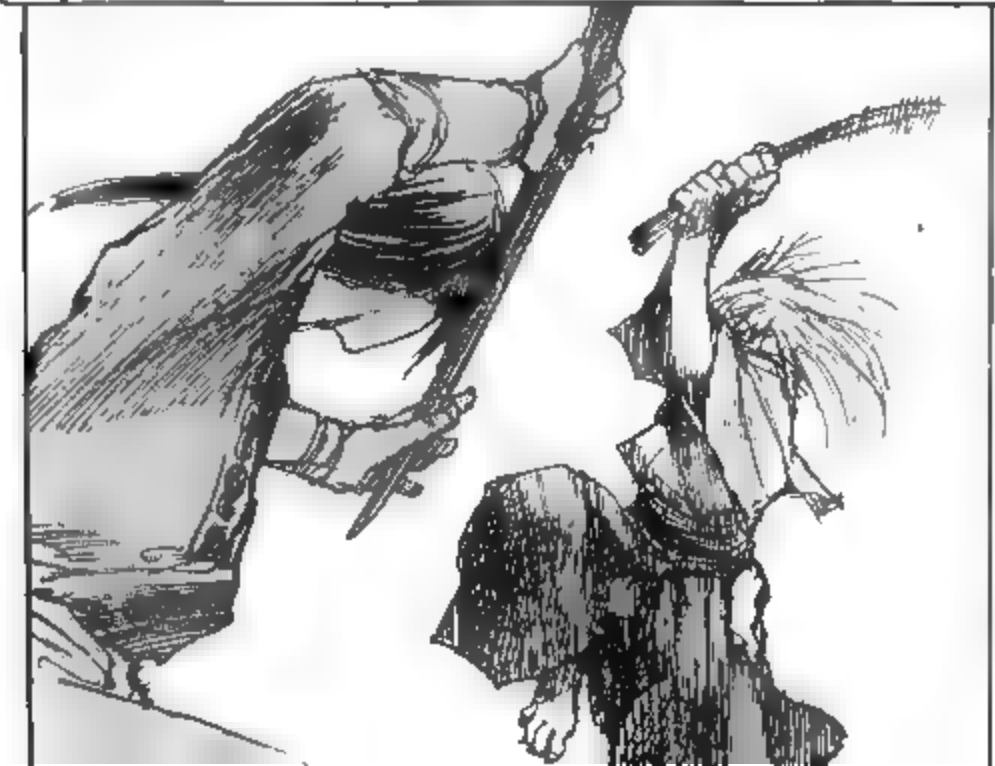
.....
.....!

YOU'RE FAST-- I'M IMPRESSED. IF YOU CAN MOVE LIKE THAT, MAYBE YOU DESERVE TO CALL YOURSELF...
...ITTŌ-RYŪ!
Y-YOU THINK I'LL L-LET YOU BEAT ME...?
YOU?
IF I...
...LOSE TO YOU, I... .....
RYAH!

I W-
WON'T
LET YOU
TAKE
HER!!
I W-W-
WON'T!
YEAH
DUMB
SON OF A
B-TCH
OH,
GREAT
JUST
GREAT
ANOTSU
KAGE-
HISA!
G-GO
BACK
TO
EDO!!


IRIYA!!
DON'T GIVE IN TO EMOTION!
YOU'LL DESTROY YOUR-SELF!

TOHHHRYAAAAAAAAA



ENOUGH!
YOU'RE DEAD TWICE OVER!
ENOUGH! THIS GAME IS FINISHED.

SECRETS
Part 3

WHA...
B-
BUT...
PRNG!

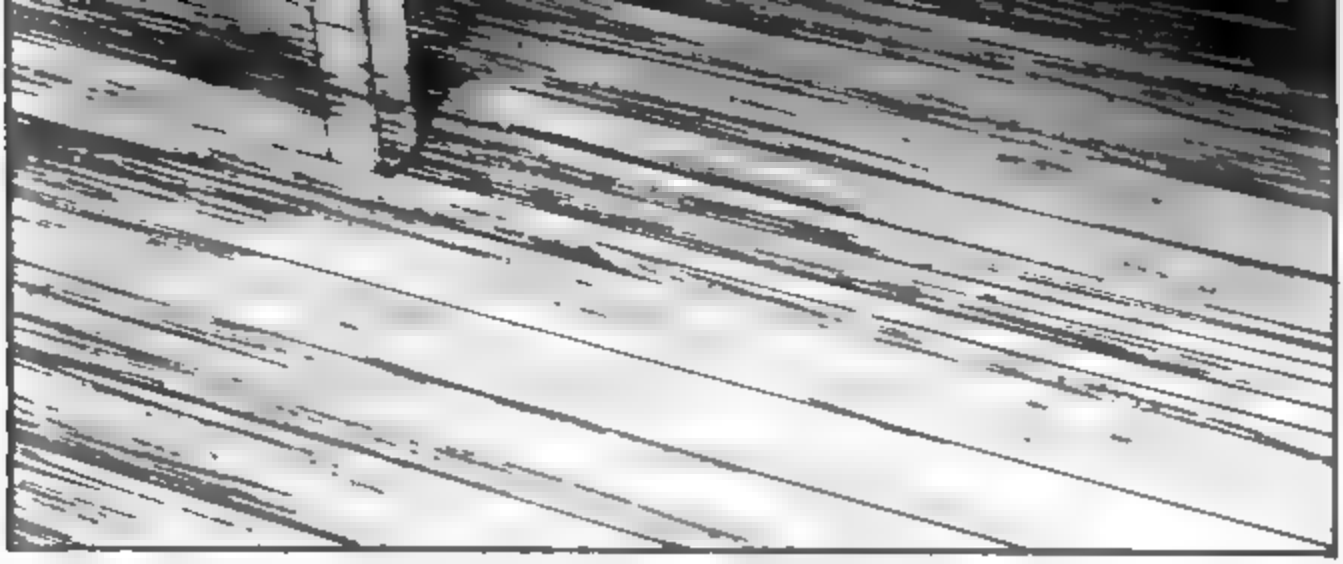
IRIYA!

HE'S
RIGHT.
YOU'VE
LOST.

YOUR
SWORD...
...NEVER
TOUCHED
YOUR
OPPONENT.

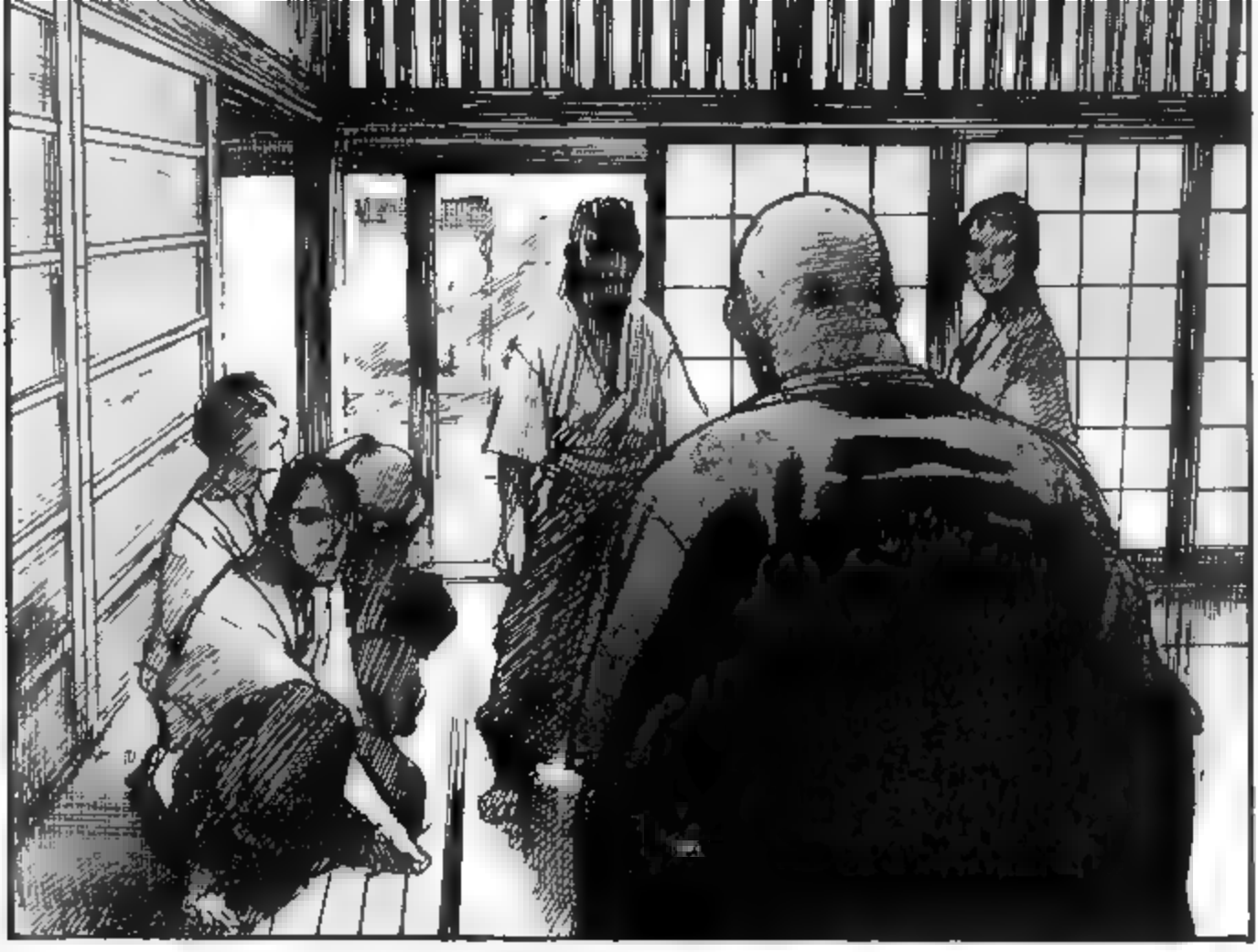
ANOTSU...?
WE'RE CONVINCED. PLEASE LOWER YOUR SWORD AND LET HIM GO.
B-BUT... KOZUE...

THOK
KOZUE! Y-YOU!
WH-WHAT *IS* THIS?! WHOSE *SIDE* ARE YOU *ON*?!
SHUT UP, IRIYA.
YOU SAID *SIZE* DOESN'T DETERMINE STRENGTH.
WELL, NOW YOU KNOW...
...THAT *AGE* DOESN'T, EITHER.
B-BUT I WAS--
AND ANOTHER THING.
NOT KNOWING WHEN TO *QUIT* IS MORE HUMILIATING THAN *LOSING.*

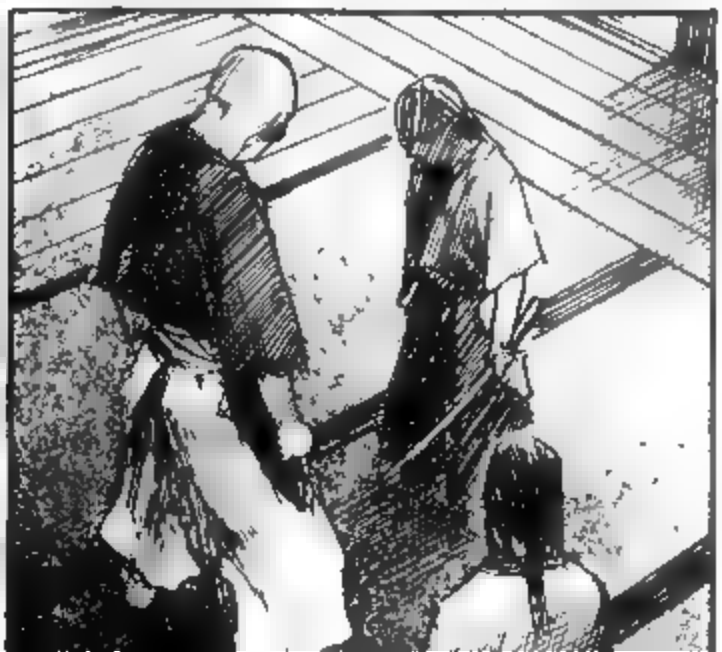


?!
AH!

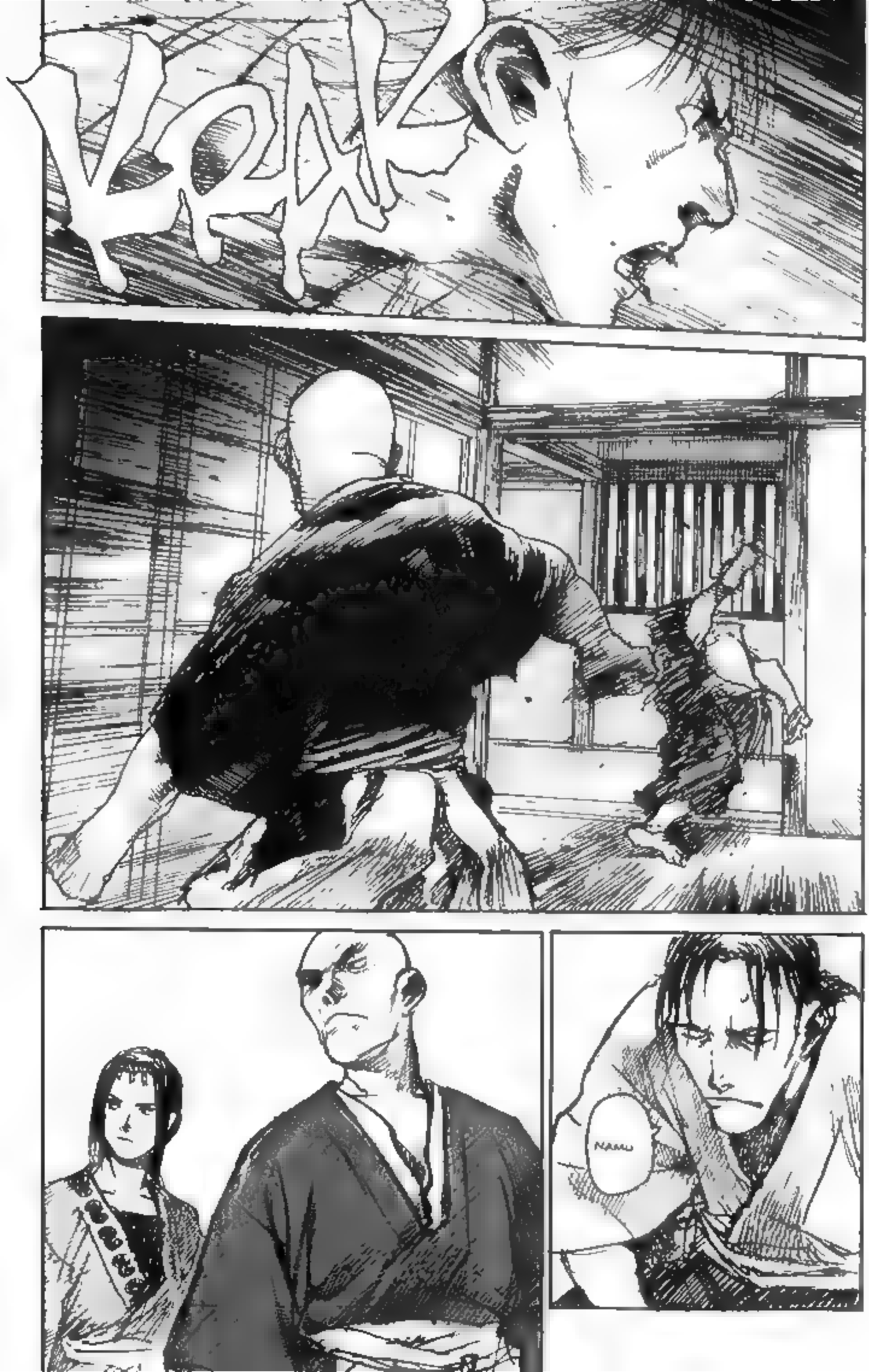
!

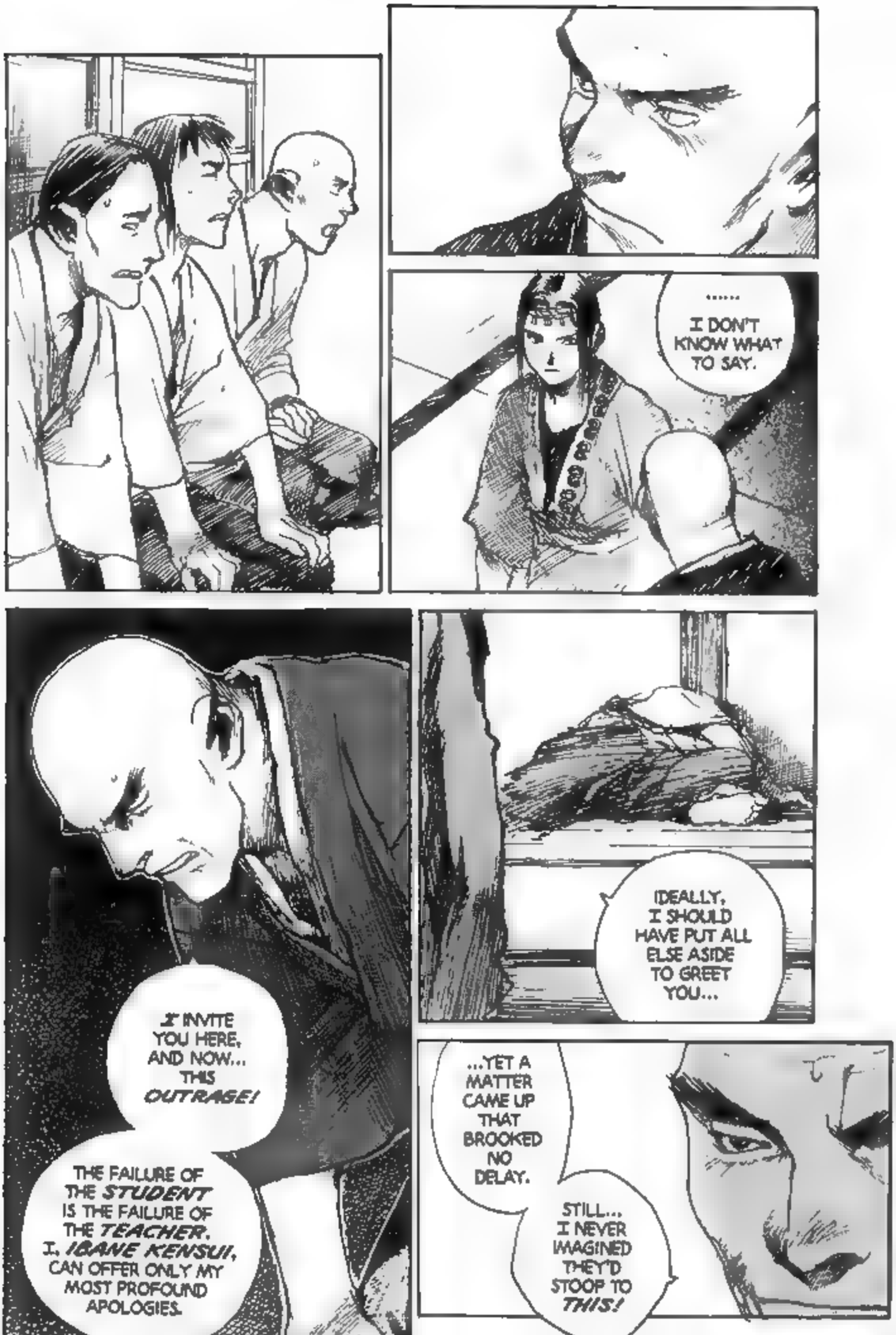


S...
SENSEI...
.....



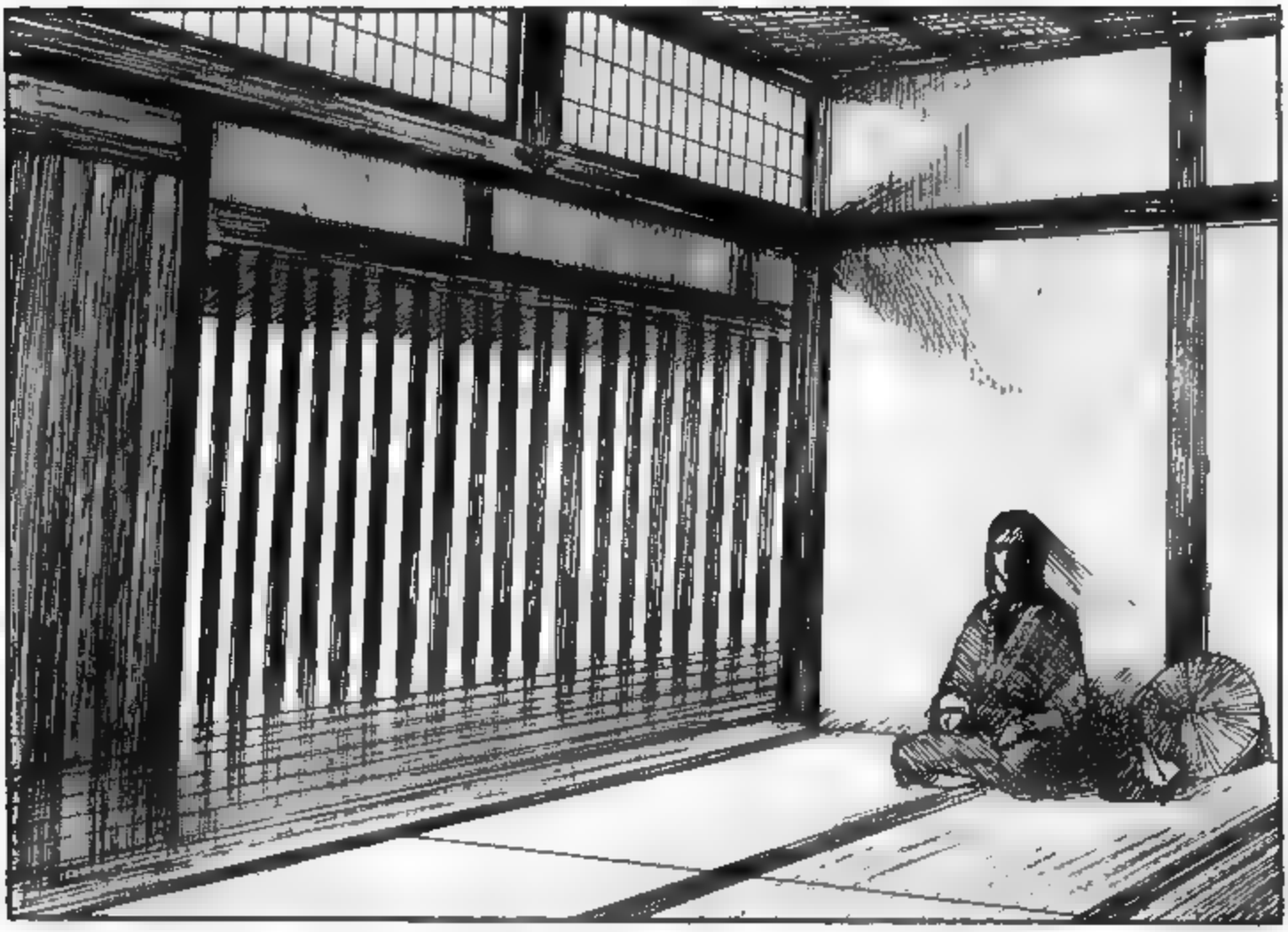
WHOP
HUGK


NAMU


.....
I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY.
IDEALLY, I SHOULD HAVE PUT ALL ELSE ASIDE TO GREET YOU...
...YET A MATTER CAME UP THAT BROOKED NO DELAY.
STILL... I NEVER IMAGINED THEY'D STOOP TO *THIS!*
I INVITE YOU HERE, AND NOW... THIS *OUTRAGE!*
THE FAILURE OF THE *STUDENT* IS THE FAILURE OF THE *TEACHER*. I, *IBANE KENSUI*, CAN OFFER ONLY MY MOST PROFOUND APOLOGIES.

FEEL FREE TO PUNISH THEM AS YOU SEE IT.
NO... IT'S REALLY NOT THAT IMPORTANT.
HARU-RŌ!
Y-YES, SIR?!
WHY ARE YOU LOOKING AFTER MY BAGGAGE?!
TAKE OUR GUEST TO THE SITTING ROOM!!
YES, SIR! SORRY, SIR! RIGHT AWAY, SIR!
SIR, WAIT! I'LL DO--
NO. IT'S FINE.

KOZUE.
I'LL EXPECT A FULL EXPLANA-TION.
YES, SIR...
.....
.....



I'M SORRY ABOUT PUTTING YOU IN THIS SMALL OUTER ROOM.
BUT AS YOU'VE SEEN FOR YOURSELF...
=Sighh=
I'M ASHAMED TO SAY IT, BUT THOSE FOOLS ARE BARELY CIVILIZED.
THEY'RE EVEN MORE THAN I CAN HANDLE, AT TIMES.
AN IMPORTANT GUEST... A REMOTE, COUNTRY DŌJŌ...
THERE WILL BE AN ENORMOUS TEMPTATION FOR THEM TO EAVESDROP.
BUT AT LEAST IF WE USE A CORNER ROOM WITH THE DOORS ALL OPEN...

...THEY CAN'T GET TOO CLOSE.
ODD. FROM WHAT THEY SAID EARLIER...
...I ASSUMED THEY KNEW EVERYTHING ALREADY.
I MEAN... SURELY THEY MUST HAVE HAD SOME REASON FOR ACTING LIKE THAT, IBANE-DONO.
THOSE SCOUN-DRELS... HMM...
...AND SO? WHAT DID YOU THINK?
...? ABOUT... WHAT?
YOUR IMPRES-SION OF OUR SCHOOL, AFTER CROSSING SWORDS WITH IRIYA.

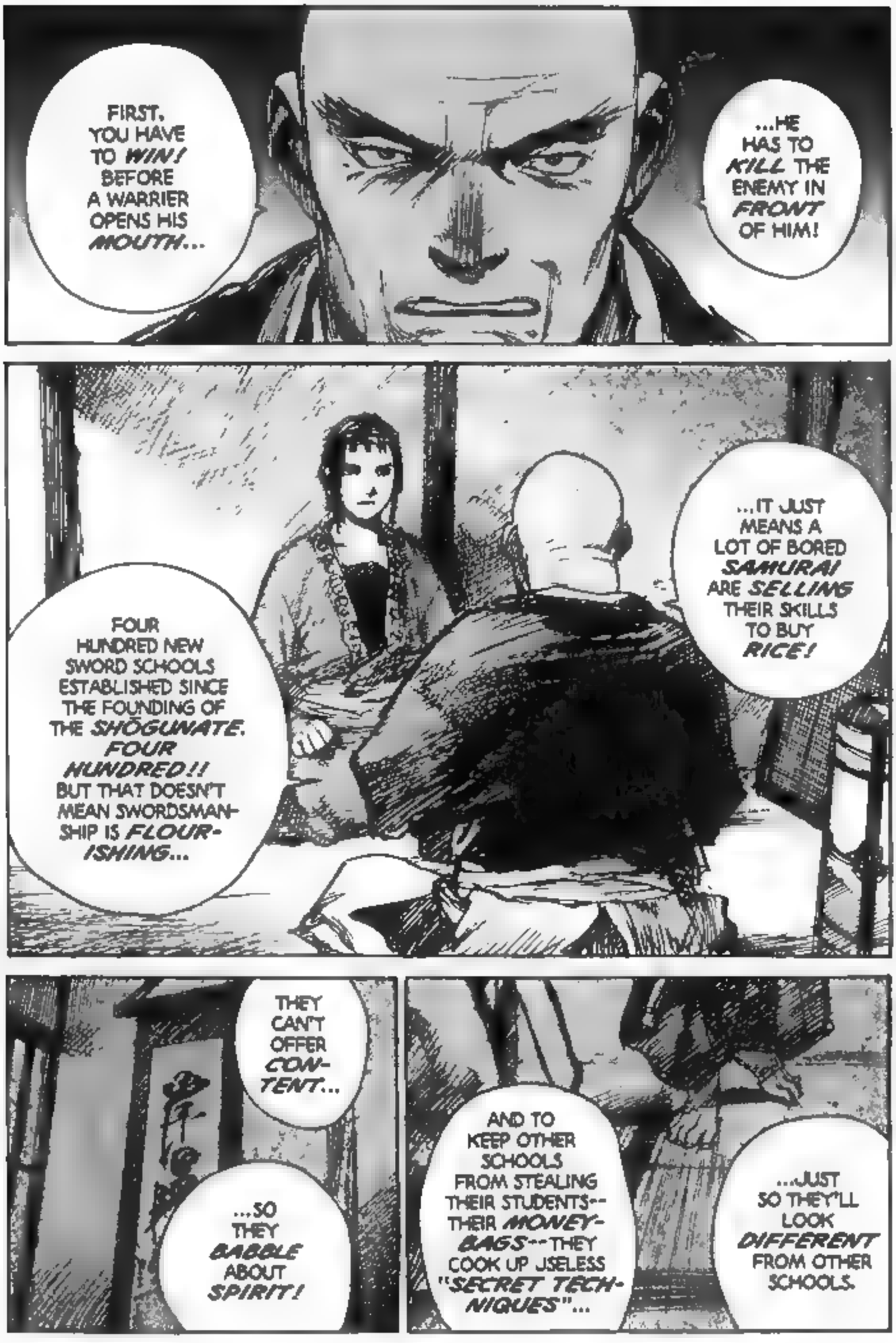
NOT BAD. THE FRUITS OF YOUR TUTELAGE, NO DOUBT?
AND THERE AREN'T MANY IN THE ITTŌ-RYŪ WHO CAN MOVE THAT FAST.
IN FACT...
...IT WAS LIKE FIGHTING SOMEONE FROM THE ITTŌ-RYŪ.
HO... REALLY?
TO PUT IT BLUNTLY, THAT'S THE WAY YOU MOVE...
...IF YOU ONLY CARE ABOUT WINNING, NOT "STYLE."
RATHER... PRIMI-TIVE, IN ITS WAY.
I SEE! HA, HA...
VERY PERCEPTIVE.

THE MAN WHO FOUNDED THIS DOJO WAS MY OWN MASTER, IBANE KENSHŪ.
BACK WHEN THE MASTER STILL LIVED, I, IN THE RASHNESS OF YOUTH, SAID MUCH THE SAME THING.

"OUR SWORDS-MANSHIP STINKS OF MUD!" TO BE EXACT. HA, HA...I HAD A LOT OF NERVE. BUT THE MASTER WASN'T ANGRY.
INSTEAD, HE TOLD ME THIS...

"THE SWORD WAS NEVER MORE NECESSARY IN OUR NATION'S HISTORY--
"--THAN IT WAS TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO, IN THAT ERA OF STRIFE AND CIVIL WAR. BUT WHAT DID 'COMBAT' ACTUALLY INVOLVE IN THOSE FAR-OFF DAYS?

"IT SURE AS HELL WASN'T LIKE THESE NEAT, STRAW-MAT DŌJŌ WE HAVE TODAY.
"YOU WERE FIGHTING IN THE MOUNTAINS, ON RIVERBANKS, TRIPPING OVER TREE ROOTS AND STONES.
"AND THE WEAPONS THEY USED! SWORDS...SPEARS... ARROWS... ANYTHING! YOU DIDN'T EVEN KNOW IF YOUR OPPONENT WOULD BE ON FOOT--
"--HE COULD COME AT YOU ON HORSE-BACK!
"HOW EFFECTIVE WOULD ANY OF OUR FANCY MODERN SWORD STYLES HAVE BEEN, BACK THEN...? WHILE WE WERE STILL EDGING OUR TOES FORWARD...
"...GAUGING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN OUR SWORDS... SOME ARMORED SAMURAI ON A WARHORSE WOULD SKEWER US WITH HIS SPEAR!"
THERE ARE FOOLS OUT THERE LOOKING FOR SPIRIT-UALITY IN THE SWORD.
BUT IF YOU'RE DEAD, WELL...
DEAD MEN CAN'T PREACH.


FIRST, YOU HAVE TO *WIN!* BEFORE A WARRIER OPENS HIS *MOUTH*...
...HE HAS TO *KILL* THE ENEMY IN *FRONT* OF HIM!
FOUR HUNDRED NEW SWORD SCHOOLS ESTABLISHED SINCE THE FOUNDING OF THE *SHÖGUNATE*. *FOUR HUNDRED!!* BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN SWORDSMANSHIP IS *FLOURISHING*...
...IT JUST MEANS A LOT OF BORED *SAMURAI* ARE *SELLING* THEIR SKILLS TO BUY *RICE!*
THEY CAN'T OFFER *CONTENT*...
...SO THEY *BABBLE* ABOUT *SPIRIT!*
AND TO KEEP OTHER SCHOOLS FROM STEALING THEIR STUDENTS-- THEIR *MONEYBAGS*--THEY COOK UP USELESS *"SECRET TECHNIQUES"*...
...JUST SO THEY'LL LOOK *DIFFERENT* FROM OTHER SCHOOLS.

AND GOD FORBID THOSE MONEYBAGS GET HURT! OH, NO, IT'S FACE-GUARDS! GLOVES! BODY ARMOR! LIGHT BAMBOO SWORDS!
SO WHAT DO YOU WIND UP WITH? PEACETIME WARRIORS WHO HAVE NEVER FACED A NAKED BLADE; FELT THE FEAR OF DEATH!
IF WAR BREAKS OUT, WHAT WILL THESE HOLLOW MEN BE GOOD FOR?
NOTHING. THAT'S WHAT!
...WHAT I'M TRYING TO DO IN THESE MOUNTAIN IS TO TRAIN WARRIORS OF THE OLD SCHOOL! MEN WHO CAN SURVIVE THE CHAOS THAT WILL SURELY VISIT THIS NATION AGAIN ONE DAY.
.....
THOSE ARE THE WORDS OF MY MASTER.
DO THEY MOVE YOU?

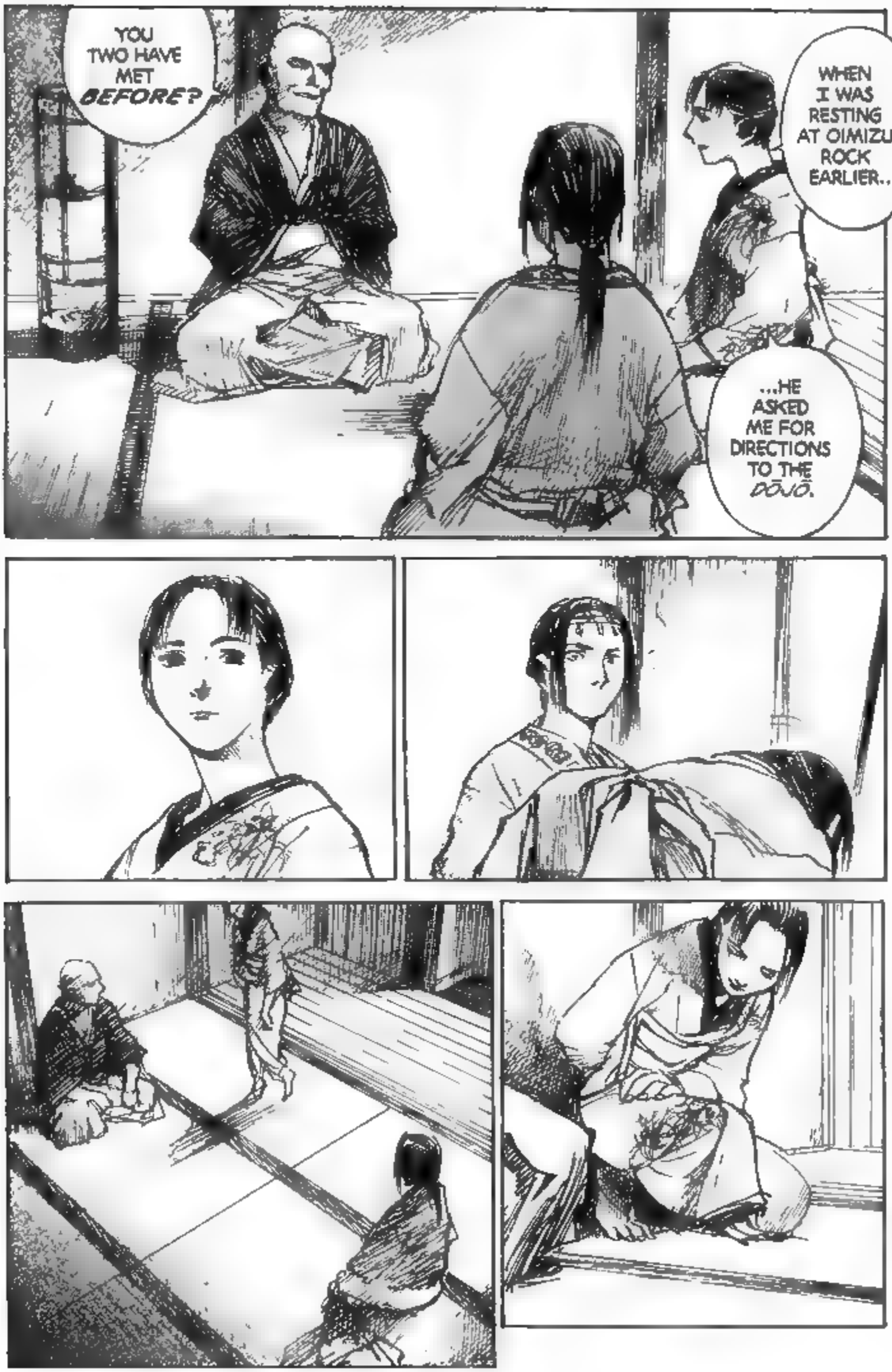
THEY STRIKE ME TO THE DEPTHS OF MY SOUL!
I WISH I HAD MET HIM BEFORE HE DIED.
DO YOU...?
YES. OF COURSE.
INDEED. I WAS CERTAIN YOU WOULD SAY THAT.
I KNEW IT WAS WORTH INVITING YOU TO THIS REMOTE PLACE.
AND YET, IBANE-DONO...

THE LETTER I RECEIVED FROM YOU...
...IT BOILS DOWN TO SOMETHING LIKE THIS--
"I WISH TO MERGE MY SWORD SCHOOL, DŌJŌ AND STUDENTS WITH THE ITTŌ-RYŪ. PLEASE COME TO DISCUSS THE DETAILS."
...ONE THING STILL PUZZLES ME.
YES, IT SEEMS WE SHARE THE SAME ASPIRATIONS. AND YET...
...IT'S STILL A TRIFLE DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND WHY YOU WOULD SURRENDER YOUR DŌJŌ.
EVEN IF, IN PRACTICE, ALL ELSE STAYS THE SAME...
...THE NAME OF SHINSYOTO-RYU WILL VANISH FOREVER.

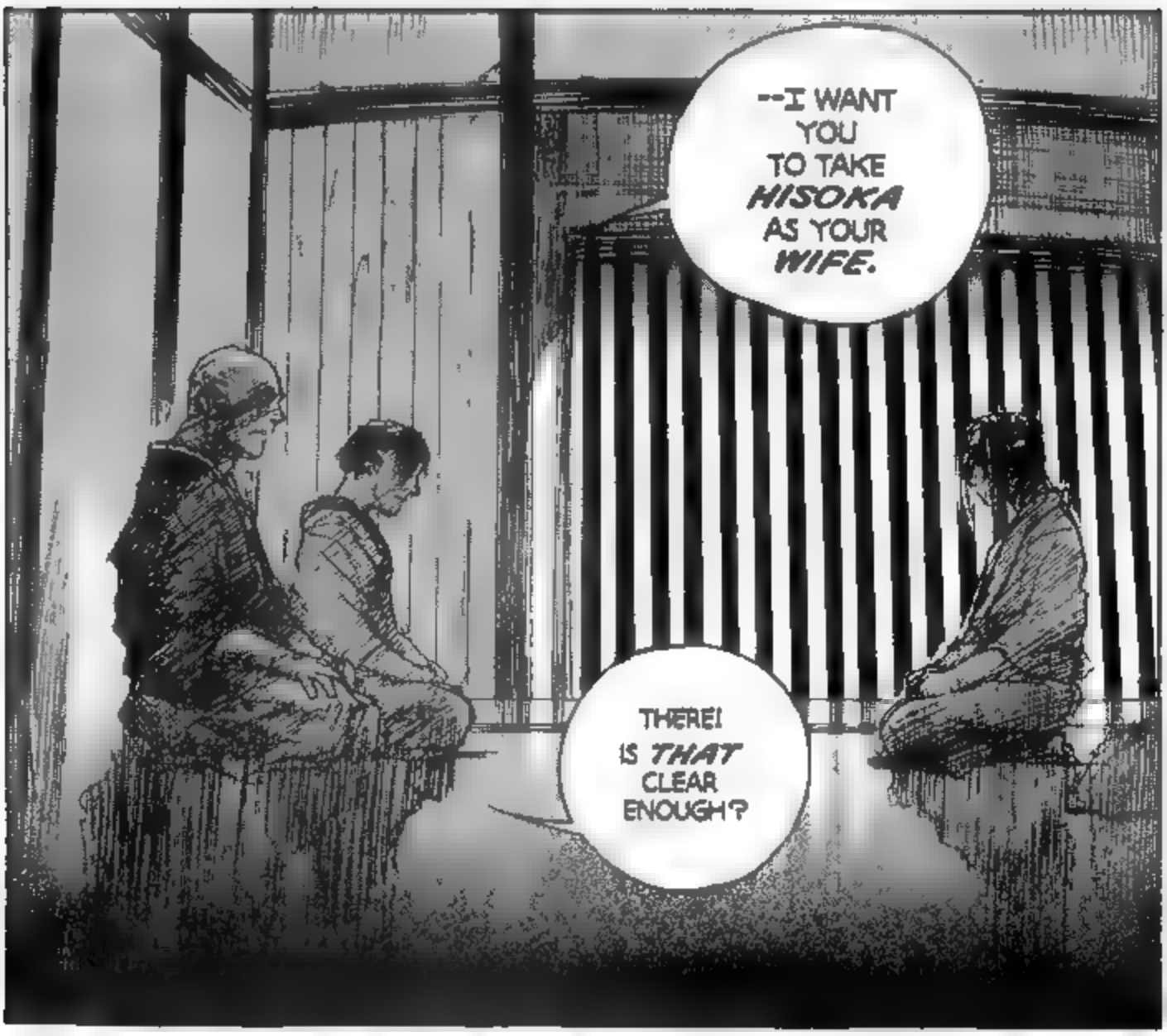
HA, HA...
YES, IF THAT WAS ALL, IT WOULD SEEM PRETTY PECULIAR...
...TRUE ENOUGH.
BUT FEAR NOT!
NOW WE GET SERIOUS.
YES, I OFFER YOU MY DŌJŌ, JUST AS I SAID.
BUT, OF COURSE, NOT UNCONDITIONALLY.
.....
.....
I'D LIKE YOU... TO AGREE TO ONE SMALL, SELFISH REQUEST.
IF THAT'S ACCEPTABLE, THEN SHINGYŌTŌ-RYŪ DISAPPEARS AFTER ONLY TWO GENERATIONS...
...WITH NO REGRETS.

.....
AND YOUR "REQUEST" IS...?
HISOKA!
COME HERE!
.....
...?

.....
.....!
WELCOME. YOU HAVE JOURNEYED FAR.
EARLIER...
.....
FORGIVE ME.
I WAS IN A HURRY, AND WAS SHORT ON COURTESY.
PLEASE... DO NOT WORRY YOURSELF.
HRN?


YOU TWO HAVE MET BEFORE?
WHEN I WAS RESTING AT OIMIZU ROCK EARLIER...
...HE ASKED ME FOR DIRECTIONS TO THE DŌJŌ.

HRMM... WELL, IF YOU'VE MET HER ALREADY, THAT HELPS.
THIS IS HISOKA-- MY ONLY DAUGHTER.
I HAD WONDERED ABOUT THAT.
I SAW NO OTHER RESIDENCES NEARBY.
AND SO...? ABOUT YOUR DAUGHTER?
WELL... HMM... HOW BEST TO PUT THIS, ANOTSU-DONO...?
WOULD IT BE TOO MUCH TO ASK FOR YOU TO TAKE HER WITH YOU?
?
I MEAN, WHEN YOU RETURN TO EDO AFTER YOUR STAY HERE.
NO, WAIT... THAT'S TOO VAGUE.
DAMN, I'M LOUSY AT THIS. LOOK--I'LL JUST SAY IT--


--I WANT YOU TO TAKE HISOKA AS YOUR WIFE.
THERE! IS THAT CLEAR ENOUGH?

HAH...?!

.....
.....
.....
phewww

SHINRI-JI!
!!
I'M COMING OUT!
Y... YES'M!
koff
.....
.....

WELL? HOW DOES IT LOOK?
EH?! L-LOOK?! ⇒ulp⇐
B-BUT... H-HYAKURIN, MA'AM... I... Y-YOU... er...

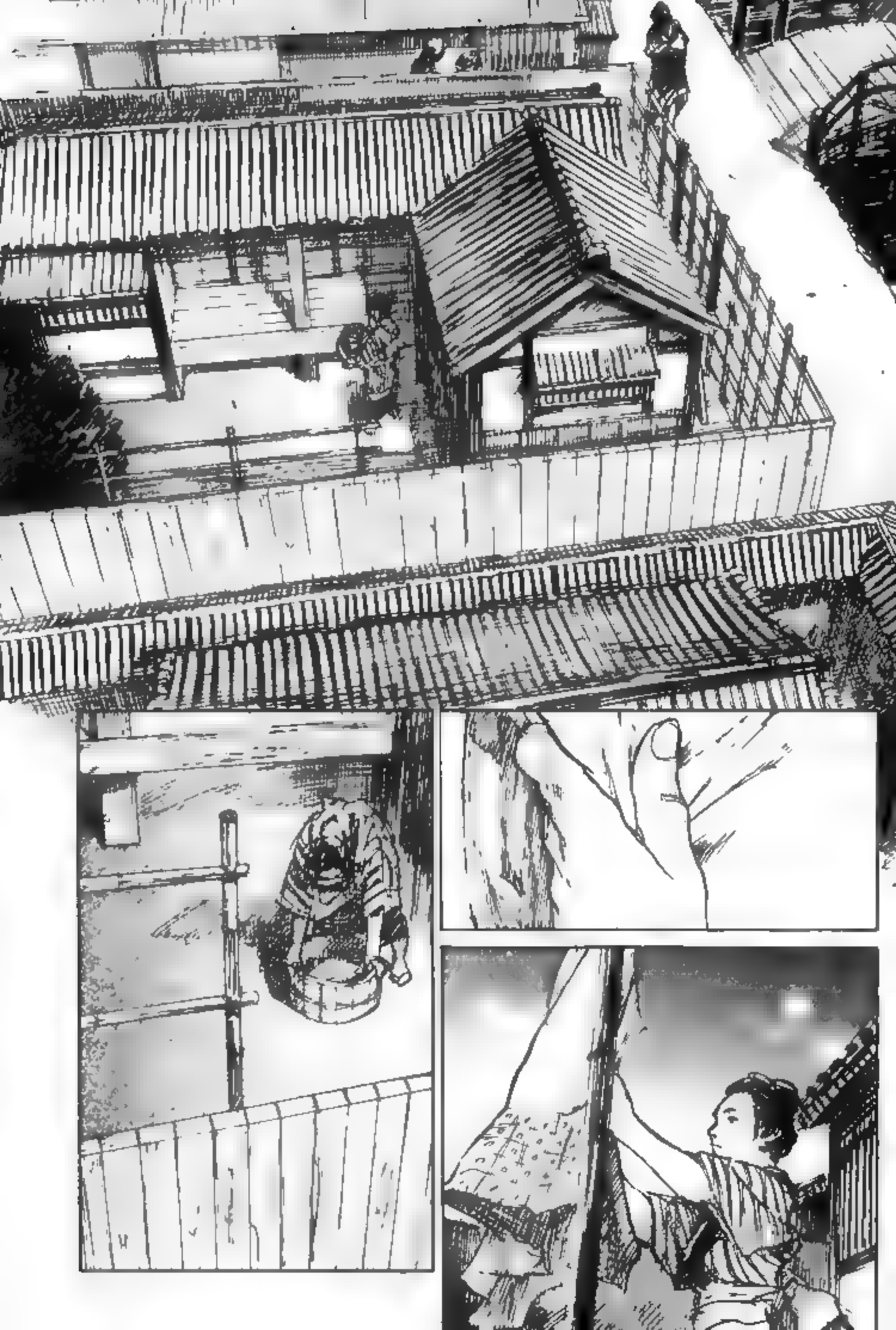
H-HOW DOES WHAT LOOK?
MY HAIR, YOU IDIOT!
WHAT DO YOU THINK I MEANT?!

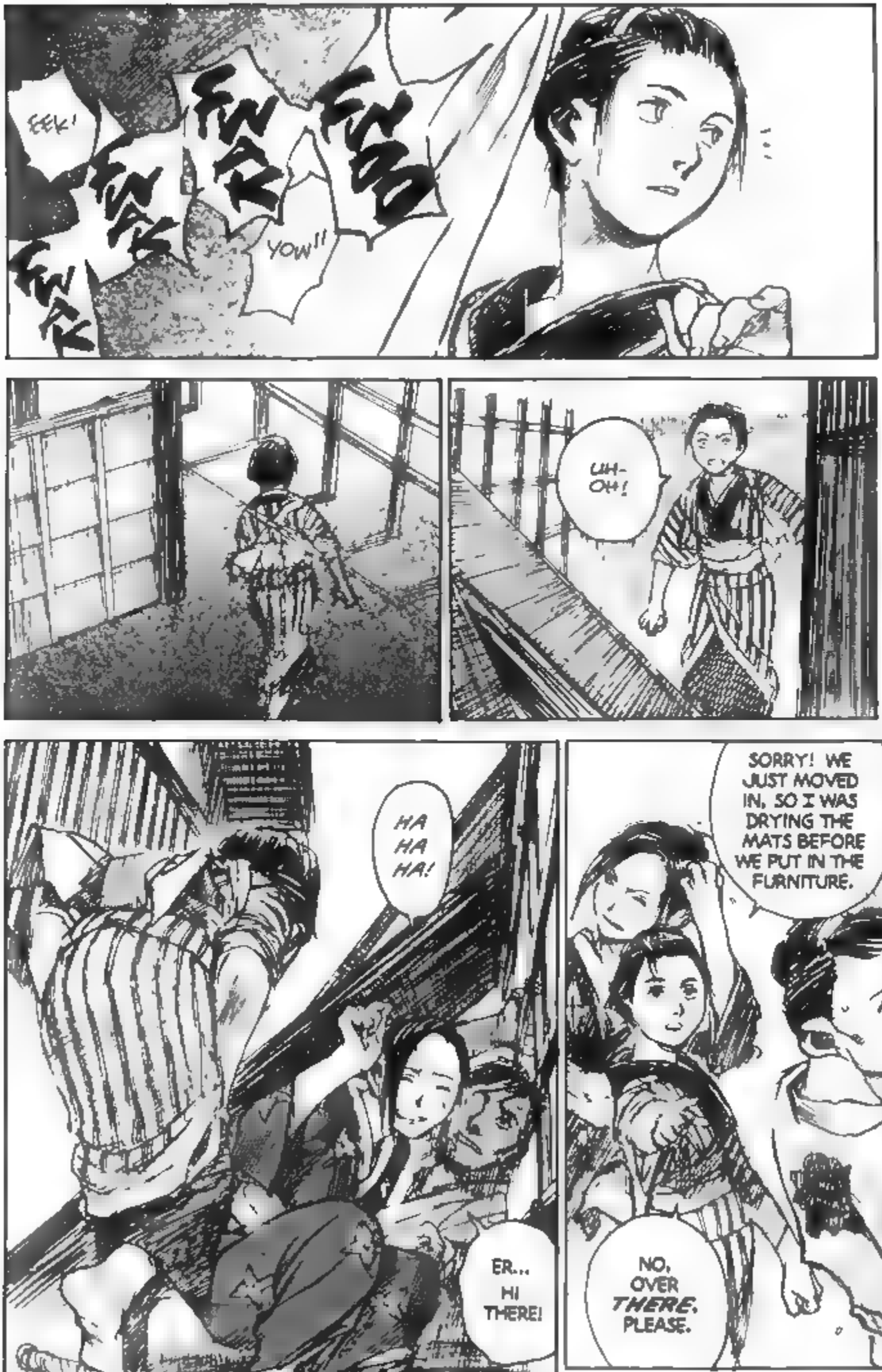
IF... IF I LOOK AT YOUR HAIR, MA'AM, I SORTA... MIGHT SEE... m-more...
SO?

HMM...
IT LOOKS PRETTY MUCH GONE.
PRETTY MUCH...?
IT'S, AH... NO EXAG-GERATION TO SAY IT'S COMPLETELY GONE!
REALLY! I SWEAR
I'LL WASH IT AGAIN.
PLEASE, GODS ABOVE...
SPLSSH
...DON'T LET GIICHI COME BACK YET!
HAHN?
YOU SAY SOMETHING, SHINRIJI...?

GOT WATER IN MY EAR
UM... ARE YOU... YOU KNOW... OKAY, BOSS?
I'M NOT ABOUT TO SLASH MY WRISTS, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU MEAN.
SURE, SURE! 'COURSE NOT! BUT I JUST WONDERED IF IT, LIKE...
...BRINGS THINGS BACK.
YOU KNOW... LIKE...
ABOUT YOUR KID, OR...
AHH! I...I... SORRY!!

I WAS JUST THINKING... THIS LONG HAIR'S NO GOOD FOR COMBAT.
GAWD, IT'S SUCH A PAIN BEING FEMALE
Hmph. I MOSTLY WEAR A WIG, ANYWAY.
MAYBE I SHOULD HACK THE DAMN STUFF OFF.
SNIP, SNIP!
JUST KID-DING!
GEEZ
YOU CAN DO THE LAUNDRY LATER. GRAB THAT BAG OVER THERE.
YOU'RE COMING WITH ME.
WHICH BAG? AH
WHERE TO, BOSS?




EEK!
FWAK
FWAK
FWAK
FWAK
YOW!!
UH-OH!
HA HA HA!
ER... HI THERE!
SORRY! WE JUST MOVED IN, SO I WAS DRYING THE MATS BEFORE WE PUT IN THE FURNITURE.
NO, OVER THERE. PLEASE.

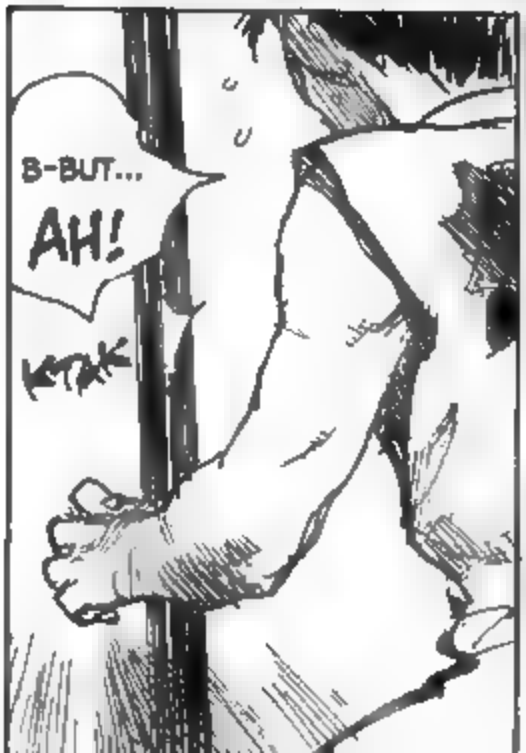
FATHER...?

AH!

YOU WANT TO GET US EVICTED JUST THREE DAYS AFTER WE MOVED IN?!
I'M GETTING A LITTLE TIRED OF MOVING EVERY FEW WEEKS!
THINK OF YOUR POOR DAUGHTER, ADDY DEAREST!
AUGH!
HUH? GUESTS?
EH...? OH! THAT'S RIGHT!
.....
.....
HELLO.

SHINRIJI, YOU STAY OUT HERE.
I NEED TO SPEAK WITH HIM ALONE.
HUH?!

PLEASE ...?


B-BUT...
AH!
KTAK

AWW... NO FAIR!
SHINRI-JI, MY GOOD MAN...

SINCE YOU'VE GOT SOME FREE TIME...
...I'VE GOT A SMALL REQUEST.
HUH?

WHAT?!
YOU WANT MY B-B-BLOOD?! ARE YOU NUTS?! WHAT FOR?!
COME ON... BE A MAN! I ONLY NEED A CUP OR TWO!
WELL, MAYBE THREE

.....
.....
YOU SHOULD HAVE JUST *RUN.*
YOU'RE SOMETHING *ELSE*, MANJL ALL THAT, FOR A GIRL WHO'S NOT EVEN *FAMILY.*
STRANGE.

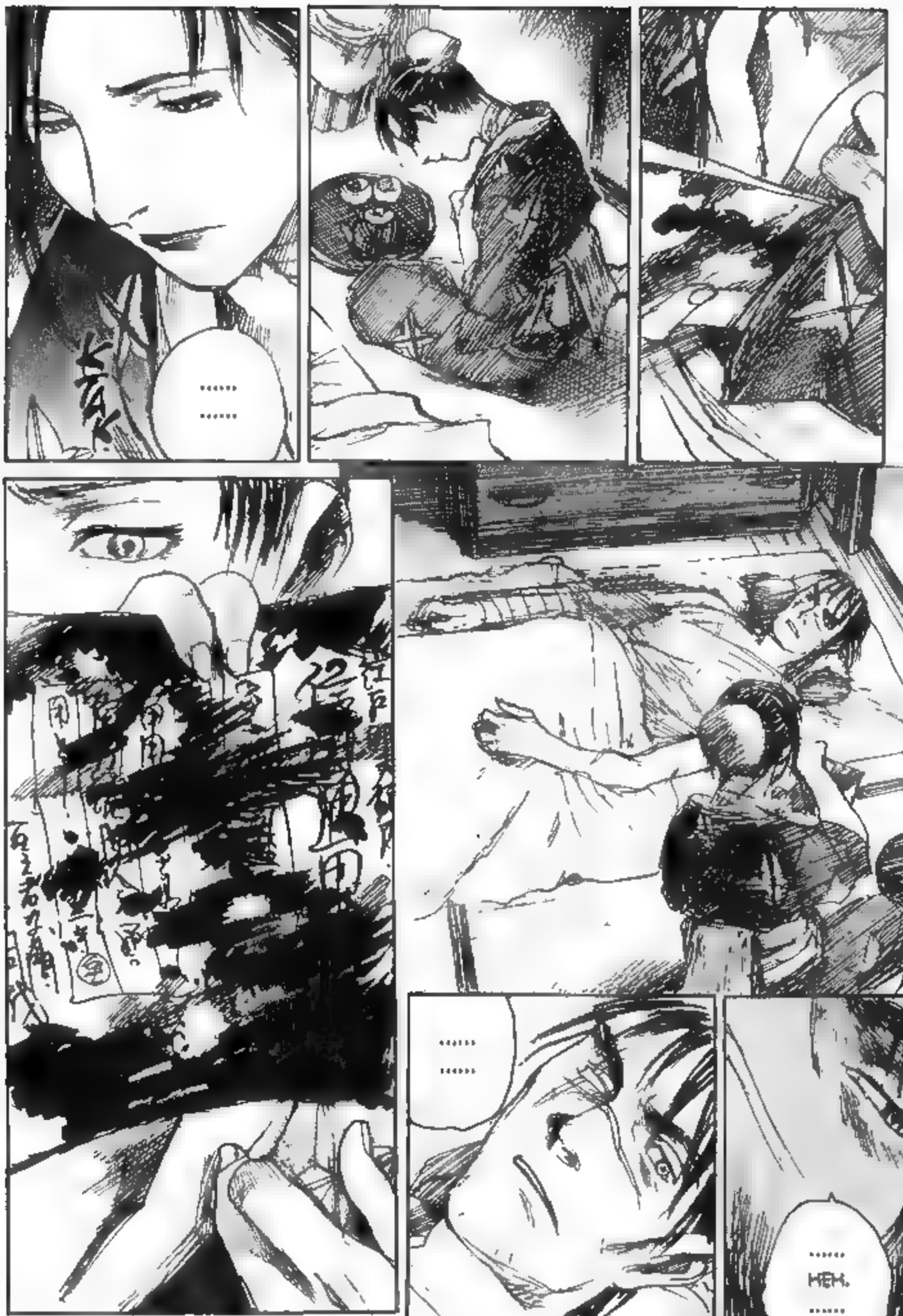
* APPROXIMATELY TWO IN THE AFTERNOON.

A DINGY BACK ROOM WHERE YOU CAN'T EVEN TELL IF IT'S NIGHT OR DAY...
WHAT D'YA EXPECT...?
HE'S HOT PROPERTY, OUR MASTER SORI.
EVEN BACK HERE I CAN HEAR ART DEAL-ERS BUGGING HIM ABOUT DEADLINES NIGHT AND DAY.
AND IF ONE OF 'EM HAPPENED TO SPOT THE FAMOUS "ROADSIDE BUTCHER" HANGING OUT AROUND THE HOUSE...
I DUNNO... MIGHT BE A FUSS. YOU FIGURE?
MM... WELL.
NOW THAT YOU MENTION IT...
HOW ABOUT THAT?
YOU OKAY...?

"THAT" ...?
YOUR NECK.
OH. THAT.
WHEN I SAW THE SHAPE YOU WERE IN...
...THE PAIN JUST... WENT AWAY.
HEH.
THAT SHINRIJI KID... IS HE HERE, TOO?
HUH? YEAH.
HE'S IN THE NEXT ROOM.
TELL HIM... SORRY 'BOUT HIS KIMONO.
IT'S PRETTY MUCH SHOT
HA HA! DON'T BE SILLY!
HE WON'T EVEN REMEMBER IF YOU DON'T BRING IT UP.

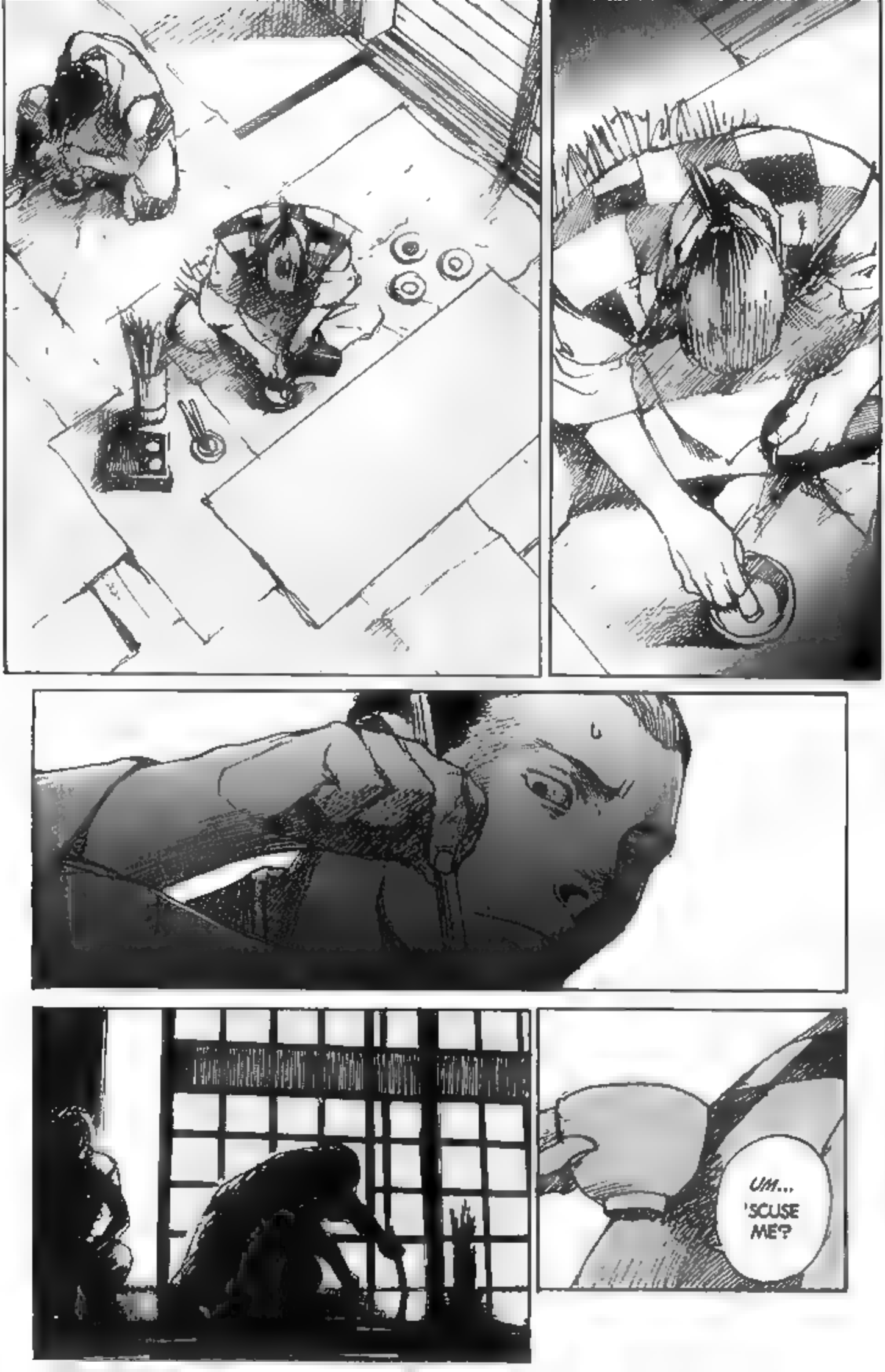
.....
.....
MY GOOD-NESS... IT CERTAINLY GETS WARM IN THIS ROOM.
ALMOST... STEAMY.
OH, THAT REMINDS ME-- I BOUGHT YOU A BUNCH OF DANGO
IF YOU DON'T MIND THEM COLD, I'LL MAKE SOME TEA...
HMM..?
CUT IT OUT. YOU'RE A GUEST.
SIT YOUR ASS DOWN AND STOP FUSSING.
"GUEST," HE SAYS.
MORE LIKE A NURSE.

WOW!
THIS IS GOOD STUFF YOU'RE DRINKING!
HYAKURIN.
THE TEGATA.
WHERE IS IT?
COME ON.
IF YOU BROUGHT IT...
...SHOW IT TO ME.

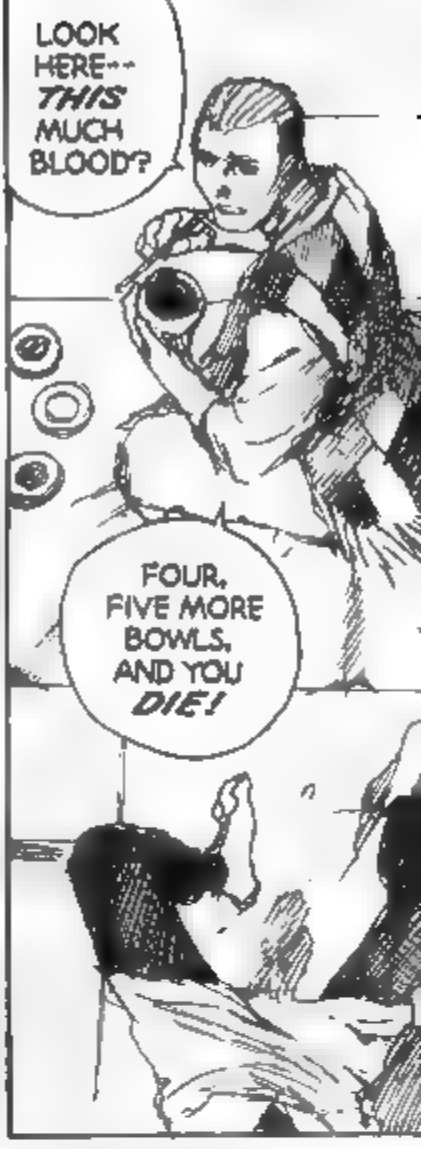

KAK.
……
……
江戸
……
……
……
HEH.
……

Y'KNOW...
I FEEL SORTA...
...TIRED.
YEAH.
.....
MANJI...
I'M SO, SO SORRY.
FORGET IT.
IT WASN'T YOUR FAULT.

STIGMATA


UM...
'SCUSE
ME?

IS THIS, LIKE... ENOUGH?
Heh heh.


LOOK HERE-- THIS MUCH BLOOD?
FOUR, FIVE MORE BOWLS, AND YOU DIE!

KLAK

-pheww-

ALL RIGHT, SHINRIJI.
TIME TO GO.
RUSHING OFF ALREADY?
DIDN'T SPEND MUCH TIME WITH THE POOR SICK FELLOW, DID YOU?
YEAH, WELL, MAYBE NOT, BUT...WHEN THE "POOR SICK FELLOW" SAYS "GET THE FUCK OUT"...
...YOU GET THE FUCK OUT. RIGHT...?

.....
.....
HE SAYS SORRY ABOUT THE KIMONO.
REMEMBER...?
HUH? WHAT KIMONO?
HEY... SHINRIJI, LAD.
AH? YES, SIR?
YOUR BLOOD... IT HAS A GREAT FINISH.
I LIKE IT.
HA,HA,HA... THAT'S, UH, GREAT.

ANYONE EVER TELL YOU YOU'RE A REAL *INGRATE*?
SOME-ONE WORRIES ABOUT YOU...
...AND YOU TREAT THEM LIKE *DIRT*.

OR... IS IT THAT SOME INFO SHE WHISPERED IN YOUR EAR...
...WASN'T QUITE COM-PLETE?
AND YOU'RE PISSED THAT YOU WOUND UP LIKE THIS BECAUSE OF IT?
HMM...?
.....
NAW.
THAT STUFF'S ALL WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE.

BUT THAT DAMN BROAD...
SHE *PLANNED* IT FIGURING, FIFTY PERCENT AT LEAST, THAT I WAS GONNA *WIN*... SEE?
BUT IN *FACT*...
WELL, JUST *LOOK* AT ME.
I SCREWED UP *BIG* TIME. CAN'T LOOK IN HER IN THE EYE.
I SEE... YEAH. TRUE ENOUGH.
ACTUALLY, YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO *AGREE*.
BY THE WAY, MASTER SŌRI. THERE WAS SOMETHING I WANTED TO ASK YOU.
IT JUST CAME BACK TO ME.

THAT WASN'T THE FIRST TIME YOU'D MET HYAKURIN...
...WAS IT?
EH...?!
YOU WERE STILL CON-SCIOUS?
REMARK-ABLE!
WELL... SORT OF.
I'M NOT SURE WHY
OKAY... I WON'T DENY IT... ALTHOUGH SHE SEEMS TO WANT ME TO.
MASTER SŌRI...
YOU EVER HEAR ABOUT A CROWD CALLED THE MUGAI-RYŪ?
.....
YES. I HAVE.
AND YOU KNOW SHE'S ONE OF 'EM?
.....
.....
YES.
EXCELLENT. JUST WHAT I WANTED TO HEAR.
NOW, FROM HERE ON, IT'S ALL SPECULA-TION, BUT... LEVEL WITH ME.

ABOVE THE MUGAI-RYŪ... THE SHŌGUNATE.
WELL...? AM I WRONG?
HEH, HEH
HA HA HA!

DAMN... NOT BAD. PRETTY GOOD, IN FACT.
ONLY... YOU COULD SAY THIS, TOO.
THE SHŌGUN'S "ABOVE" ANYONE WHO WEARS A SWORD.
LOOK-- I'M NOT PLAYING WORD GAMES
MANJI, MY FRIEND... sighh
I'M SORRY, BUT YOU'RE ONLY HALF RIGHT.
AT BEST
HMM. IT WOULD BE TOUGH NOT KNOWING ANY-THING ABOUT HER WHEN YOUR OWN LIFE'S AN OPEN BOOK.
I CAN SEE THAT.

OKAY! SO! IF YOU *REALLY* WANT TO KNOW, I'LL TELL YOU ALL ABOUT THEM.
ALL I KNOW, ANYWAY
GO AHEAD.
DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE IN THAT SWORD SCHOOL?
SIX... OR SO I HEARD.
RIGHT.
ONLY... OF THAT SIX, THOSE ACTUALLY DIRECTLY SERVING THE *SHÖGUNATE* LIKE YOU THINK ARE A TOTAL OF... *ONE*.

THE REST ARE LIKE...
I DUNNO
...SOMETHING A PIMP DRAGGED IN. NO, SORRY-- BAD METAPHOR.
THERE'S NO COMPARISON, NOT REALLY.
AFTER ALL, THEY'RE ALL ALLOWED TO CARRY SWORDS.
.....
.....
YOU STILL DON'T GET IT?
SO LOOK... MASTER SORI...
HOW DID YOU KNOW HYAKURIN'S WITH THE MUGAI-RYŪ?
BECAUSE SHE TOLD ME HERSELF.
TWO NIGHTS AGO.
TWO NIGHTS AGO?!
THE DAY YOU GOT CARRIED HERE. THAT NIGHT.

"SHE WAS STILL WEARING THE SAME BLOOD-SOAKED KIMONO...AND STANDING IN THE ENTRANCE, CLUTCHING A ROLLED UP STRAW MAT...
"...WITH YOUR ARM AND LEGS IN IT."
.....
.....
BUT AS FOR HOW SHE JOINED THE MUGAI-RYŪ...
...I CAN ONLY MAKE AN EDUCATED GUESS.
?
IF MEMORY SERVES ME...
...SHE'S THE SAME WOMAN WHO MARRIED MY FORMER FRIEND, KAKŌSAI GENKEI.

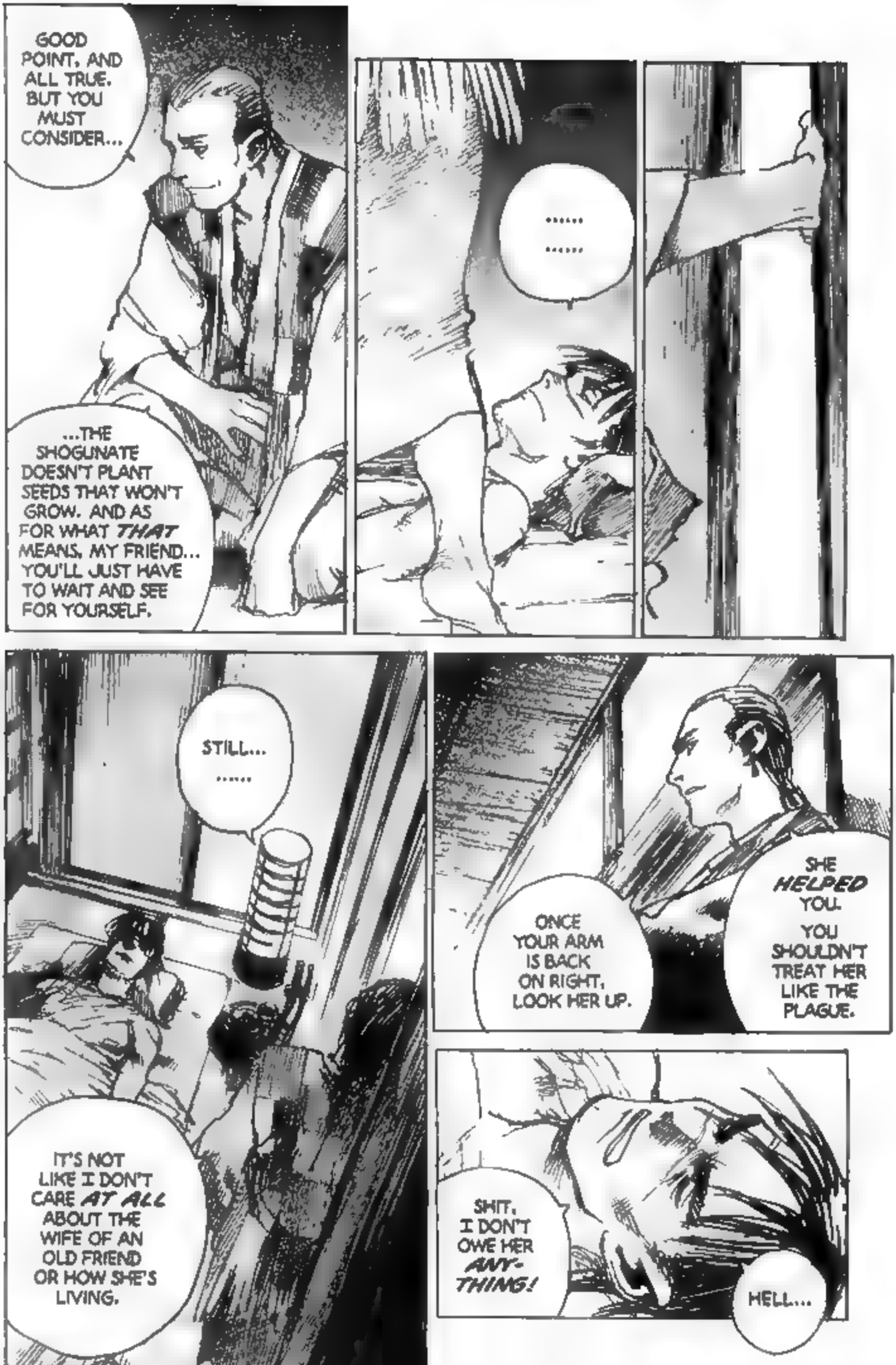
"FORMER" ...?
KAKŌSAI... PASSED AWAY. THREE YEARS AGO.
IN FACT, HE WAS MURDERED.
AND THE MURDER-ER...
.....
WAS HIS WIFE.
.....
.....
HYAKU-RIN...
.....
HOW SHE WOUND UP KILLING HER HUSBAND, WHAT HER REASONS WERE...
...I JUST DON'T KNOW.

BUT AFTER-WARDS...
THE SANTE GINMI* SENTENCED HER TO BEHEADING... AND IMPALE-MENT ABOVE THE PRISON GATE.
STOP RIGHT THERE.
WHAT'S A WOMAN LIKE THAT DOING IN... IN...
YES, QUITE. NOW YOU SEE IT.
THE MUGAI-RYŪ ARE SIMPLY A PACK OF CRIMINALS, AND THE SHŌGUNATE HAS THEM BY THE THROAT.
IN FACT...

*: SIMILAR TO TODAY'S SUPREME COURT.

THEY'RE NOT JUST ORDINARY MURDERERS.
THEY'RE ALL FROM DEATH ROW.
WE MUGAI-RYŪ FOLK... CAN'T EVER TRAVEL TO ANOTHER HAN.
EVEN IF WE SECRETLY APPLIED FOR A TEGATA...
...WE'D BE CAUGHT AND STOPPED FROM ON HIGH.
OR IN THE WORST CASE... WE'D GET "DISAP-PEARED."
DOES THAT RING A BELL...?
.....
.....
ANYWAY, BECAUSE THEY ARE... THAT MAKES THEM EVEN MORE SECRETIVE AND SPECIALIZED THAN ORDINARY SPIES...
...LIKE ME.

SO. DO YOU KNOW *WHY* I TOLD YOU ALL THAT?
WELL...
I FIGURE IT'S BECAUSE IF YOU SPILL ALL *THEIR* SECRETS...
...YOU THINK I'LL BE MORE WILLING TO *WORK* WITH THEM.
EXACTLY.
LOOKING OUT FOR YOUR *COMRADES*, HUH?
HER PEOPLE AREN'T MY *COM-RADES.*
I'M DOING IT FOR *YOU*, BECAUSE YOU'RE TAKING CARE OF MY BEST FRIEND'S *DAUGHTER.*
THAT'S ALL.
BUT, MASTER SORI...IF THE *MUGAI-RYŪ'S* UNDER THE SHOGUNATE'S WING...
...THAT MEANS THE SHOGUNATE IS TRYING TO *KILL* ANOTSU, TOO!
BUT...IN THAT CASE... WHY DID THE *BANSHI* AT KOBOTOKE STILL LET HIM GO TO *KAGA?*


GOOD POINT, AND ALL TRUE. BUT YOU MUST CONSIDER...
...THE SHOGUNATE DOESN'T PLANT SEEDS THAT WON'T GROW. AND AS FOR WHAT THAT MEANS, MY FRIEND... YOU'LL JUST HAVE TO WAIT AND SEE FOR YOURSELF.
.....
.....
STILL...
.....
IT'S NOT LIKE I DON'T CARE AT ALL ABOUT THE WIFE OF AN OLD FRIEND OR HOW SHE'S LIVING.
ONCE YOUR ARM IS BACK ON RIGHT, LOOK HER UP.
SHE HELPED YOU.
YOU SHOULDN'T TREAT HER LIKE THE PLAGUE.
SHIT, I DON'T OWE HER ANY-THING!
HELL...

I MEAN...
...IN THE END, I DIDN'T EVEN GET THE TEGATA.
"TEGATA" ...?
HUH...? YOU DIDN'T HEAR ABOUT THAT, MASTER SORI?
I COULDN'T APPLY FOR A DAMN TSŪKŌ TEGATA, OF COURSE.
SO THERE I WAS, PISSING AND MOANING 'CAUSE I COULDN'T RUN AFTER THAT CRAZY KID.
ARE YOU SERIOUS...? IF YOU TWO HAD COME TO ME FIRST...
...I COULD HAVE GOTTEN YOU AS MANY AS YOU NEEDED.

WHAT?!
?? WHY THE BIG NOISE, MY FRIEND?

AH, HAH.
DON'T TELL ME...

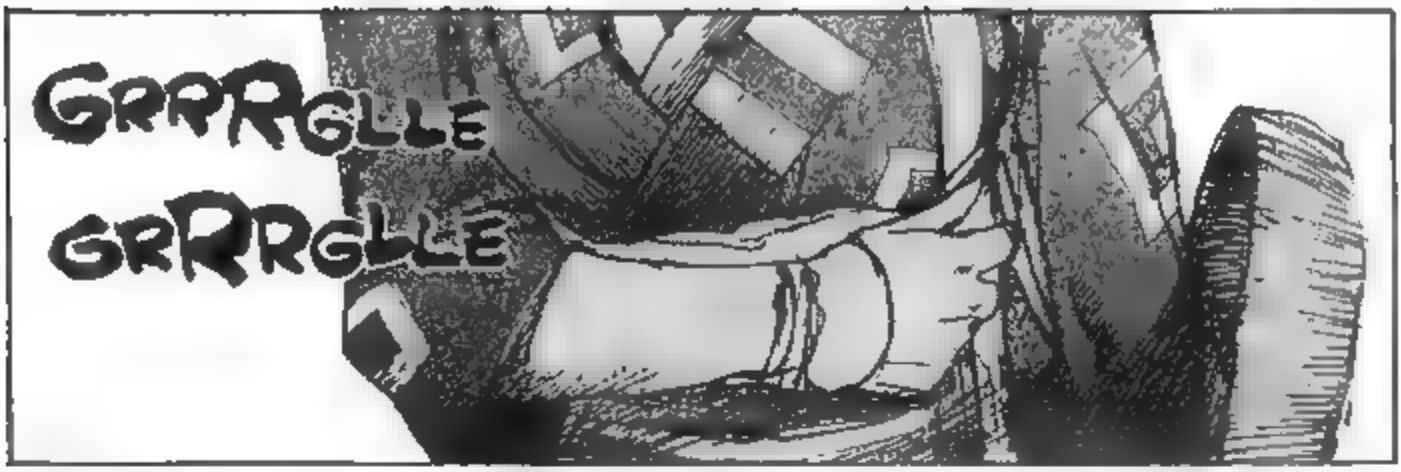
...YOU TALKED TO THE MUGAI-RYŪ ABOUT GETTING ONE?
APGGH!!

NOW THAT'S BARKING UP THE WRONG TREE!!
YOU CRIMINALS CAN KNOCK YOUR BRAINS OUT, BUT YOU'LL NEVER GET A TEGATA.

HUH. WHAT POSSESSED YOU TO GO TO THEM, I WONDER?
I MEAN, YOU COULD HAVE HAD ONE FOR THE ASKING FROM PRACTICALLY ANYBODY ELSE...

AAAGRAAGH!!
.....
THAT MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER?
!!
....
....
WAIT JUST A GOD DAMN...
WH... WHAT A FUCKING WASTE!!
WAIT A SEC... THAT GODDAMN BIMBO!
SHE DIDN'T ASK YOU, EITHER!
WHY DIDN'T SHE KNOW ANY BETTER?!
HYAKURIN WAS ALWAYS SERIOUS... BUT UNIMAG-INATIVE.
I IMAGINE SHE DID THINK IT THROUGH... TO THE BEST OF HER ABILITY, ANYWAY.
ARGHH... THAT WHOLE FUCKING BLOODBATH... FOR NOTHING!!

NOW, NOW... IF YOU HADN'T BEEN BROUGHT HERE BUTCHERED LIKE A WILD BOAR, YOU WOULDN'T HAVE FOUND OUT ABOUT IT *NOW*.
SO IT ALL WORKED OUT FOR THE BEST, YES...?
"FOR THE BEST"...?! CUT ME SOME *SLACK*, SŌRI!!


GRRRGLLE
GRRRGLLE

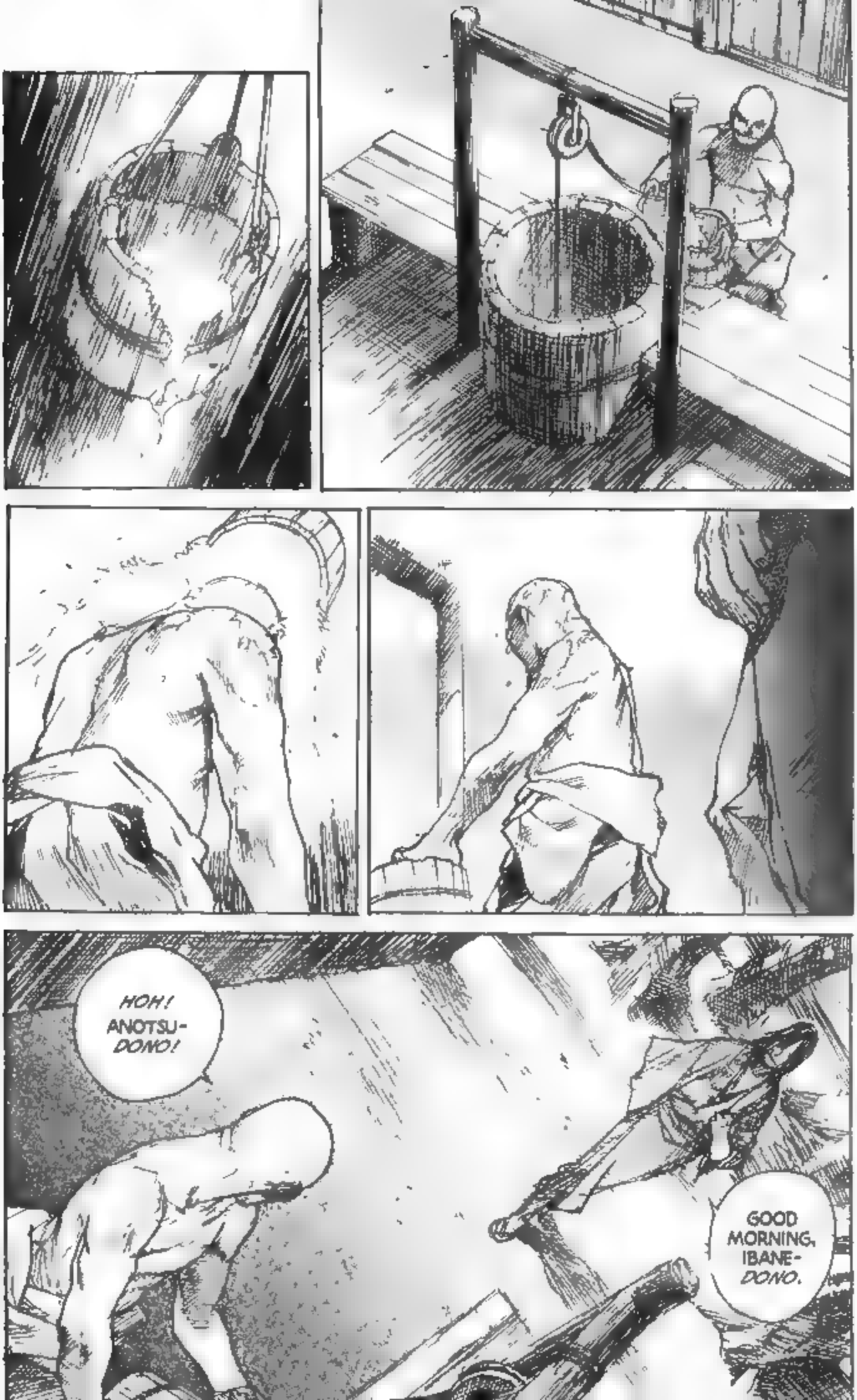
I'VE BEEN WONDER-ING... LATELY...
...WAS I BORN WITH A BIGGER STOMACH THAN OTHER GIRLS?

ANOTHER TEA SHOP. THAT MAKES THREE...

NO... BETTER GO ANOTHER THREE K/.
OH SECOND THOUGHT, MAKE THAT TWO.

THUSIC

FUNKTT!
ONE HUNDRED AND NINETY-NINE...
WHH TT!
=hnff=
.....


HOH! ANOTSU-DONO!
GOOD MORNING, IBANE-DONO.

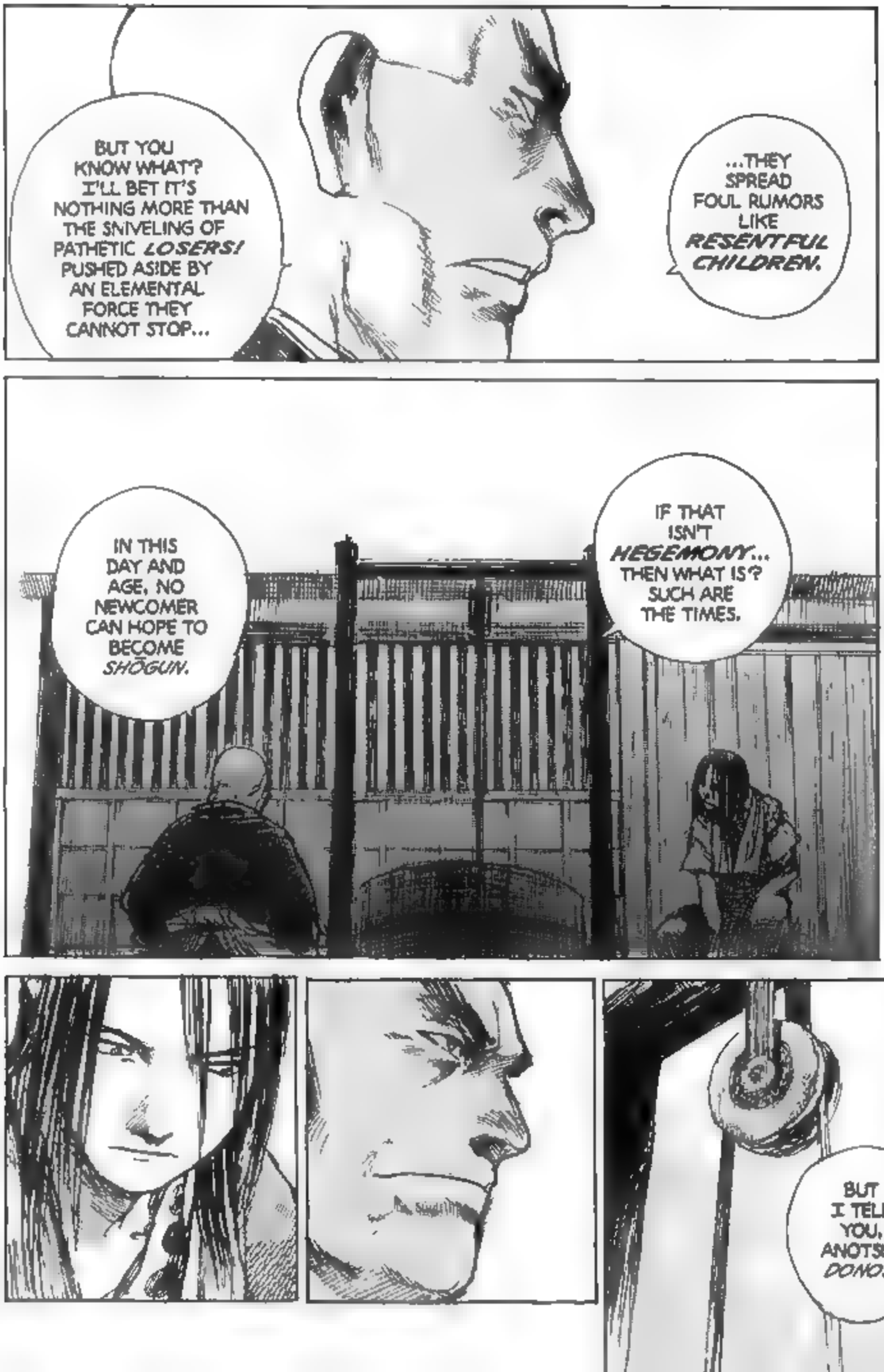
HARD WORK, SO EARLY IN THE MORNING.
HA, HA! GOT TO BE DONE, EH?
THERE I AM CURSING AND THRASHING MY STUDENTS EVERYDAY...
...TELLING THEM THEY'VE GOT TO BE MIGHTY KENSHI WHO COULD GO ANYWHERE IN THE COUNTRY WITH THEIR HEADS HELD HIGH...
...BUT IN MY HEART OF HEARTS, I'M AFRAID THEY'RE GOING TO KICK MY BUTT.
IT'S TOUGH RUNNING YOUR OWN SWORD SCHOOL, ISN'T IT... KAGEHISA-DONO?
I COULDN'T AGREE WITH YOU MORE... KENSUI-DONO.
:Uhnnn:
BY THE WAY...
.....
THAT MATTER I MENTIONED YESTERDAY... HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT IT?

ACTUALLY, I HAVE. AND I'D LIKE MORE OF AN EXPLANATION. WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO OFFER YOUR PRECIOUS ONLY DAUGHTER...
...TO SOMEONE FROM THE INFAMOUS ITTŌ-RYŪ?
IS IT SO STRANGE TO WANT HER TO HAVE AN OUTSTANDING KENSHI FOR A HUSBAND?
AND AS FOR "INFAMOUS"...? A MATTER OF OPINION.
STILL... YOU HAVE OUTSTANDING KENSHI RIGHT HERE. FOR INSTANCE, THE MAN I FOUGHT YESTERDAY...
FRANKLY, THERE AREN'T MANY THAT GOOD IN ALL OF EDO.
AH, HIM.
IF HE'D BEATEN YOU, I MIGHT ACTUALLY HAVE CONSIDERED IT.

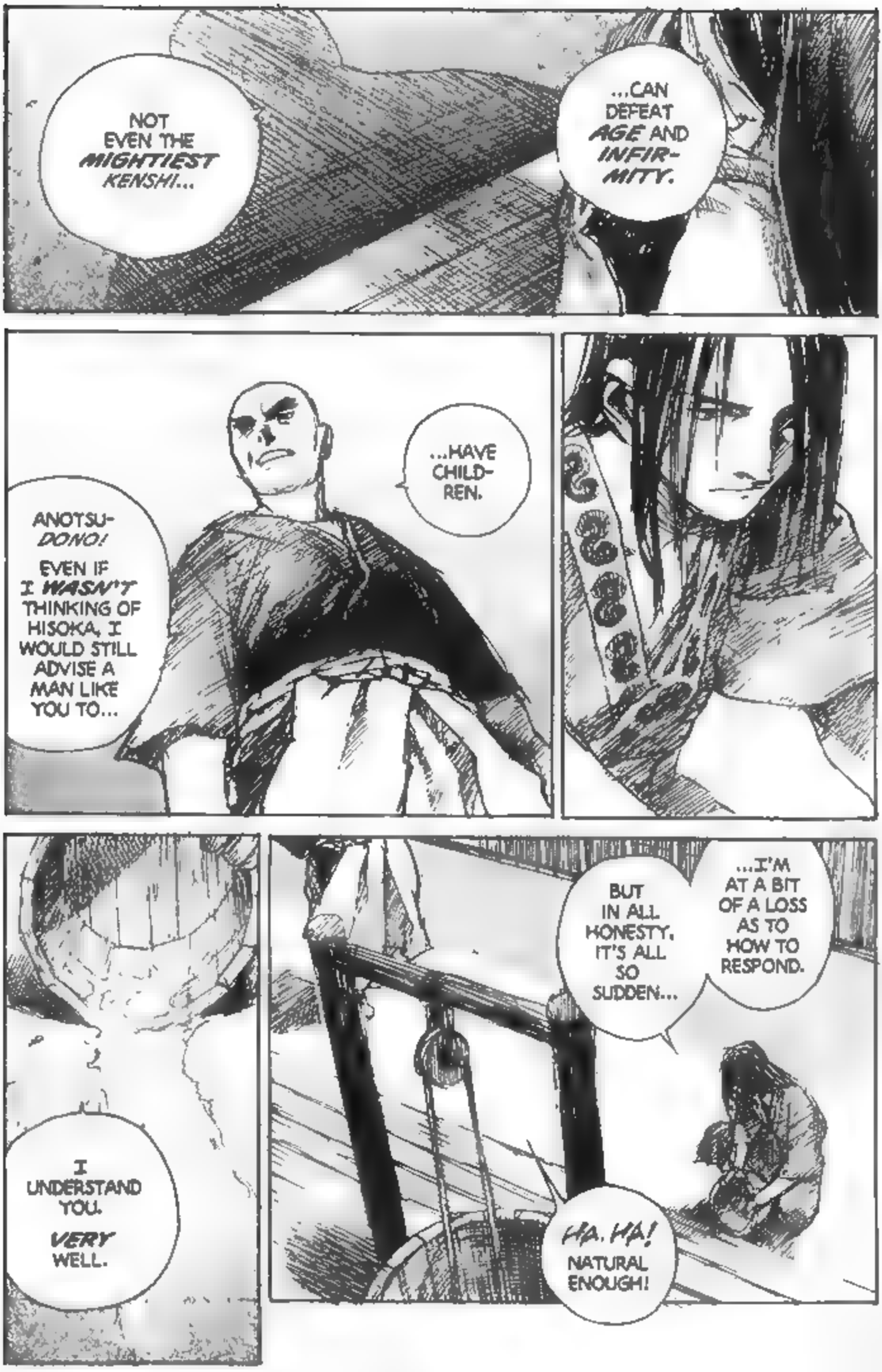
YES, WELL... I TOOK THE LIBERTY OF WATCH-ING, ACTUALLY.
THE LAST HALF, AT LEAST. MY APOL-OGIES.
HAH! WE'RE AN ISOLATED MOUNTAIN DOJO, AS YOU KNOW.
I IMAGINE MORE THAN A FEW OF THEM ARE PRICKLY ABOUT ME MARRYING HER OFF TO AN OUTSIDER.
HE'S BEEN LUSTING AFTER HISOKA FOR YEARS...
...THAT MAN-- IRIYA.
SOUNDS LIKE THAT MIGHT CAUSE SOME TROUBLE...
HA,HA! COME ON!
THEY'RE STILL KENSHI. THE SCOUN-DRELS.
THEY UNDERSTAND THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST.
NO ONE'S GOING TO GET UPPITY ONCE YOU'VE WHIPPED THEM.
NOT HERE, AT LEAST. I'M QUITE SURE OF THAT.

NO. REST ASSURED... CONSIDER THIS DŌJŌ...
...TO BE THE LATEST FLOWER OF YOUR HEGE-MONY.
IBANE-DONO... I'VE NEVER CONSID-ERED...
...WHAT I DO TO BE HEGE-MONY.
EXCUSE ME?! HA, HA!
SURELY YOU JEST...?
ANOTSU-DONO... .....
HAVE YOU EVER LOOKED BACK AT THE ROAD YOU'VE TAKEN? CONTEMPLATED YOUR PATH?

YOU KNOW...I HAD YOU INVESTIGATED BEFORE I INVITED YOU HERE. I HAD SOME QUALMS ABOUT DOING IT, BUT...
I UNDERSTAND THAT BEFORE YOU TOOK OVER... THE ITTŌ-RYŪ WAS JUST ANOTHER LITTLE EDO DŌJŌ.
BUT NATURALLY...NOT ALL THE RUMORS ARE GOOD.
--YOU'VE BURNED THE ITTŌ-RYŪ BRAND INTO FIFTY DŌJŌ IN THE CAPITAL.
YOUR FOLLOWERS NUMBER FIVE HUNDRED... AND COUNTING.
ONE HEARS THAT THE ITTŌ-RYŪ USE HUMAN WAVE TACTICS...
...THAT YOUR MEN AMBUSH, NOT FIGHT... NO, THERE'S NO SHORTAGE OF PEOPLE READY TO FLING MUD.
BUT IN TWO YEARS--
--JUST TWO YEARS--


BUT YOU KNOW WHAT? I'LL BET IT'S NOTHING MORE THAN THE SNIVELING OF PATHETIC *LOSERS!* PUSHED ASIDE BY AN ELEMENTAL FORCE THEY CANNOT STOP...
...THEY SPREAD FOUL RUMORS LIKE *RESENTFUL CHILDREN.*
IN THIS DAY AND AGE, NO NEWCOMER CAN HOPE TO BECOME *SHŌGUN.*
IF THAT ISN'T *HEGEMONY*... THEN WHAT IS? SUCH ARE THE TIMES.
BUT I TELL YOU, ANOTSU-*DONO*...

...AS I'M SURE YOU KNOW FULL WELL...
...YOUR ITTŌ-RYŪ...?
IT IS A TEMPLE SUPPORTED BY A SINGLE PILLAR.
THAT PILLAR, OF COURSE, IS YOU.
A MIGHTY COLUMN, INDEED.
ONE NOT EASILY TOPPLED.
AS LONG AS YOU REMAIN RESOLUTE IN SPIRIT AND STRONG IN BODY...
...THE ITTŌ-RYŪ MONOLITH WILL STAND, UNSHAKE-ABLE.
AND YET...


NOT EVEN THE MIGHTIEST KENSHI...
...CAN DEFEAT AGE AND INFIR-MITY.
ANOTSU-DONO!
EVEN IF I WASN'T THINKING OF HISOKA, I WOULD STILL ADVISE A MAN LIKE YOU TO...
...HAVE CHILD-REN.
I UNDERSTAND YOU.
VERY WELL.
BUT IN ALL HONESTY, IT'S ALL SO SUDDEN...
...I'M AT A BIT OF A LOSS AS TO HOW TO RESPOND.
HA. HA! NATURAL ENOUGH!

THAT WAS MY INTEN-TION.
THEN, AT THE VERY LEAST, SPEND SOME TIME TALKING WITH HISOKA.
AND I WOULDN'T TRUST ANYONE WHO COULD GIVE ME AN ANSWER ON THE SPOT.
BUT YOU'LL BE STAYING IN KAGA FOR A WHILE, YES...?
SHE'S FRAIL... BUT SHE'S HAS A QUICK MIND.
I DON'T SEE ANY REASON FOR YOU NOT TO HAVE A FEW WORDS WITH HER... OR AM I JUST A FOOLISH OLD MAN?
WELL... LATER, THEN.

WE'VE BEEN HERE FOR QUITE SOME TIME...
...AND YET, YOU HAVEN'T SPOKEN A WORD.

SORRY.
I'VE BEEN THINKING. ABOUT THE LAST FEW YEARS.

.....
.....
HISOKA-
DONO...
KENSUI-
DONO
ISN'T
REALLY
YOUR
FATHER...
IS HE.
.....
.....
I'M
CURIOUS...
WHAT WAS IT
THAT BROUGHT
YOU TO THAT
REALIZATION,
KAGEHISA-
DONO?
IT WAS
SIMPLY TOO
STRANGE FOR
SUCH A DYNAMIC
MAN TO
SURRENDER HIS
DŌJŌ FOR THE
GOOD OF HIS
DAUGHTER.

YES... IT'S TRUE. ACTUALLY, I'M THE GRAND-DAUGHTER OF *IBANE KENSHŪ*, THE FOUNDER OF *SHINGYŌTŌ-RYŪ*.
HE WAS KENSUI'S *SENSEI*.
MY MOTHER AND FATHER PASSED BEFORE GRAND-FATHER.
SO, ON HIS DEATHBED, HE ENTRUSTED ME TO HIS MOST PROMISING DISCIPLE.
HE'S *SO* LIKE A FATHER TO ME... HE TREATS ME LIKE FAMILY.
BETTER THAN FAMILY.
A STRONG SENSE OF DUTY...?
YES... EVEN *FOOL-ISHLY* SO.
THAT MAN... HE'S *STILL* BOUND BY THE WORDS MY GRAND-FATHER SPOKE TO HIM...
...TWENTY YEARS AGO.

"MARRY HER TO THE STRONGEST MAN YOU CAN FIND." THAT WAS THE LAST THING GRANDFATHER SAID.
OF COURSE, HE COULDN'T HAVE MEANT IT SO... SERIOUS-LY.
YET BECAUSE OF THAT... MY STEPFATHER HAS SACRIFICED HIS OWN HAPPINESS, ALWAYS. ALL FOR ME...
EVEN SO, TO GIVE UP THE DŌJŌ HIS SENSEI BUILT...
...I IMAGINE THAT IDEA CAME TO HIM AFTER HE MET YOU.
"HERE'S A MAN MY SENSEI WOULD HAVE TRUSTED WITH HIS DAUGHTER...
"...AND HIS DŌJŌ."
WELL, ACTUALLY...
.....
.....

BUT THEN... DON'T YOU THINK IT'S EVEN *MORE* UNREASONABLE TO OFFER YOU TO ME?
REALLY...? WHY?
NATURAL-LY...
...YOUR GRAND-FATHER KENSHŪ-*DONO* MUST HAVE MEANT A MAN OF *CHARAC-TER.*
PERHAPS YOU DON'T KNOW THIS, BUT THE *ITTŌ-RYŪ*...WE *DESERVE* OUR REPUTA-TION.
"THEY MAY BE GOOD WITH THEIR SWORDS, BUT AT HEART THEY'RE JUST A *GANG OF RUFFIANS.*" PEOPLE SAY THAT... AND IT'S *TRUE.*

ACTUALLY...
.....
YES, EVEN HERE IN DISTANT KAGA...
...WE HEAR OUR SHARE OF UNSAVORY RUMORS.
I CAN'T KNOW THE TRUTH OF SUCH STORIES.
I HAVEN'T SEEN IT WITH MY OWN EYES.
HOWEVER... I *DO* REMEMBER THAT, LONG AGO...
...THAT MY GRANDFATHER HAD THIS TO SAY TO HIS STUDENTS--
--"THROUGHOUT HISTORY, IT IS THOSE WHO CALL THEMSELVES *RIGHTEOUS* WHO DESTROY THEIR COUNTRIES...
"...AND IT IS THOSE WHO ACKNOWLEDGE THE *EVIL* WITHIN WHO RISE UP TO SAVE THE NATION."

WHICH IS THE ITTŌ-RYŪ, I WON-DER...?
.....
.....
HISOKA-DONO...

YESTERDAY, AND AGAIN THIS MORNING...
...I HAD A CHANCE TO TALK WITH KENSUI-*DONO*.
...IF NOT WITH KENSUI-*DONO* HIMSELF, AT LEAST WITH YOUR ***GRAND-FATHER'S PHILOSOPHY***.
AND I CAN'T DENY I FOUND SOME ***COMMON GROUND***...
BEFORE I LEFT EDO, WE WERE VISITED BY AN EMISSARY FROM THE SHŌGUNATE.
IN SHORT, THEY WANT TO ESTABLISH A NEW SCHOOL FOR THE SWORD, AND THEY WANT TO BORROW SOME OF US TO BE THEIR TEACHERS.
TO A DEGREE, I'D BEEN EXPECT-ING IT.
FOR THE LAST TWO YEARS I'VE SYSTEMATICALLY ***CRUSHED*** OTHER *DŌJŌ*, IGNORING ALL THE CRITICISM HEAPED UPON US.
YOU MAY THINK MY EFFORTS HAVE FINALLY BORNE FRUIT...

...BUT THAT'S WRONG.
THE REAL WORK OF THE ITTŌ-RYŪ HAS JUST BEGUN!
WITHIN THE NEXT FEW YEARS I INTEND TO HAVE ITTŌ-RYŪ SYMPATHIZERS IN EVERY KEY POST...
...IN THE ENTIRE SHŌGUNATE MILITARY.
THE SHOGUN'S ARMY IS AN ANCIENT, BLOATED WATCHDOG WITH BLUNTED CLAWS AND ROTTEN TEETH.
THE ITTŌ-RYŪ WILL BE THE NEW CLAWS AND TEETH, SHARP AND DEADLY--AND THE REST WILL FOLLOW SUIT.
AND YET...
...THE ITTŌ-RYŪ AS IT EXISTS TODAY ISN'T UP TO IT.

WE'RE NOT A TRUE SCHOOL. WE'RE NOT EVEN A PROPER ORGANI-ZATION.
WE'RE A GANG. RABBLE!
...BUT THERE'S NOT A MAN AMONG US WHO KNOWS HOW TO PASS OUR SKILLS ON TO OTHERS.
MAYBE THAT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR TESTS OF STRENGTH...
HISOKA... .....
I BELIEVE MY TRUE WORK AS THE LEADER OF THE ITTŌ-RYŪ...
...HAS JUST BEGUN!
SHOULD I START A FAMILY NOW...
...I'D BE ONE OF THOSE FATHERS WHO NEVER LOOKS BACK.

AND... I KNOW FULL WELL I'M A MAN WHO KNOWS *NOTHING* ABOUT MAKING A WOMAN HAPPY.
AND YOU? AREN'T YOU ANNOYED AT HAVING YOUR FUTURE DECIDED FOR YOU BY A COUPLE OF *MEN*...?
NO. I DON'T MIND.

STILL... I WONDER WHAT KIND OF WOMAN REALLY IS SUITED...
...FOR A HUSBAND LIKE YOU.
PERHAPS SHE'LL SIMPLY TURN OUT TO BE...
...A WOMAN WHO CAN SEE YOU TO THE CONCLUSION OF YOUR JOURNEY. SOMEONE TO WATCH OVER YOU... TO THE END.
I IMAGINE...
...IT'S NOT A WOMAN WHO CAN HEAL YOUR HEART... NOR SOMEONE WHO CAN FIGHT AT YOUR SIDE.
AND WHICH ARE YOU, I WON-DER...?

ANOTSU-DONO...
...WHEN YOU LOOK AT MY STEP-FATHER... WHAT DO YOU SEE?
MY STEP-FATHER...
.....
AS OLD AS HE IS, HE'S NEVER MARRIED.
HE'S WORRIED, YOU SEE?
WORRIED THAT IF HE TAKES A WIFE AND HAS HIS OWN CHILD, I'D BE HURT.
FOR YEARS NOW, I'VE JUST...
...WANTED TO FREE HIM FROM THOSE SHACKLES.
IT...
.....
IT'S TRAGIC, DON'T YOU THINK?

AND SO... I'M HAPPY. TRULY HAPPY...
...THAT SOMEONE HAS APPEARED THAT HE CONSIDERS APPROPRI-ATE.
IF YOU ASK IF I'LL WATCH OVER YOU TO THE VERY END... I HAVE NO CONFIDENCE IN THAT.
I'LL PROBABLY DIE LONG BEFORE YOU. BUT IF YOU SHOULD GRACE ME BY SAYING...
..."THAT DOESN'T MATTER"...
...THEN...
...AS LONG AS THE DAYS OF MY LIFE PERMIT...
...I SHALL BE GLAD TO SHARE THEM WITH YOU.

WHISSHH

DON'T MOVE.

.....
LET'S HEAD BACK.
THE WIND'S TURNED COLD.
.....
SO IT HAS...

SKIN
Part 1

SKLCCH

AH... MASTER SŌRI.
YOU'RE LOOKING BETTER.

I'LL ADMIT I WAS PRETTY IMPRESSED WHEN I LEARNED...
...ABOUT THOSE *KESSEN-CHŪ* OF YOURS, BUT IT SEEMS THEY AREN'T *PERFECT*.

YEAH. TRUTH IS, I DON'T QUITE GET IT *MYSELF*.

MAYBE WHEN TOO MUCH TIME GOES BY, LIKE *THIS* TIME...
...THE DAMN WORMS CAN'T QUITE DECIDE... "IS THIS OUR FLESH OR NOT?"
I DUNNO SOMETHING LIKE THAT

EH...?!
I *SAID*, I GUESS I'VE BEEN KIND OF A PAIN IN THE ASS.
AN APOL-OGY...? FROM *YOU*? HEH HEH HEH...
GUESS YOU STILL HAVEN'T RECOVERED FROM BEING SPIKED IN THE HEAD.
I WASN'T TALKING ABOUT *YOU*, *SENSEI*.
SO... Uh... WHERE'S *TATSU-BŌ*?
MAKING LUNCH, I SUPPOSE. YOU WANT TO SEE HER?
YEAH... JUST FOR A SEC.

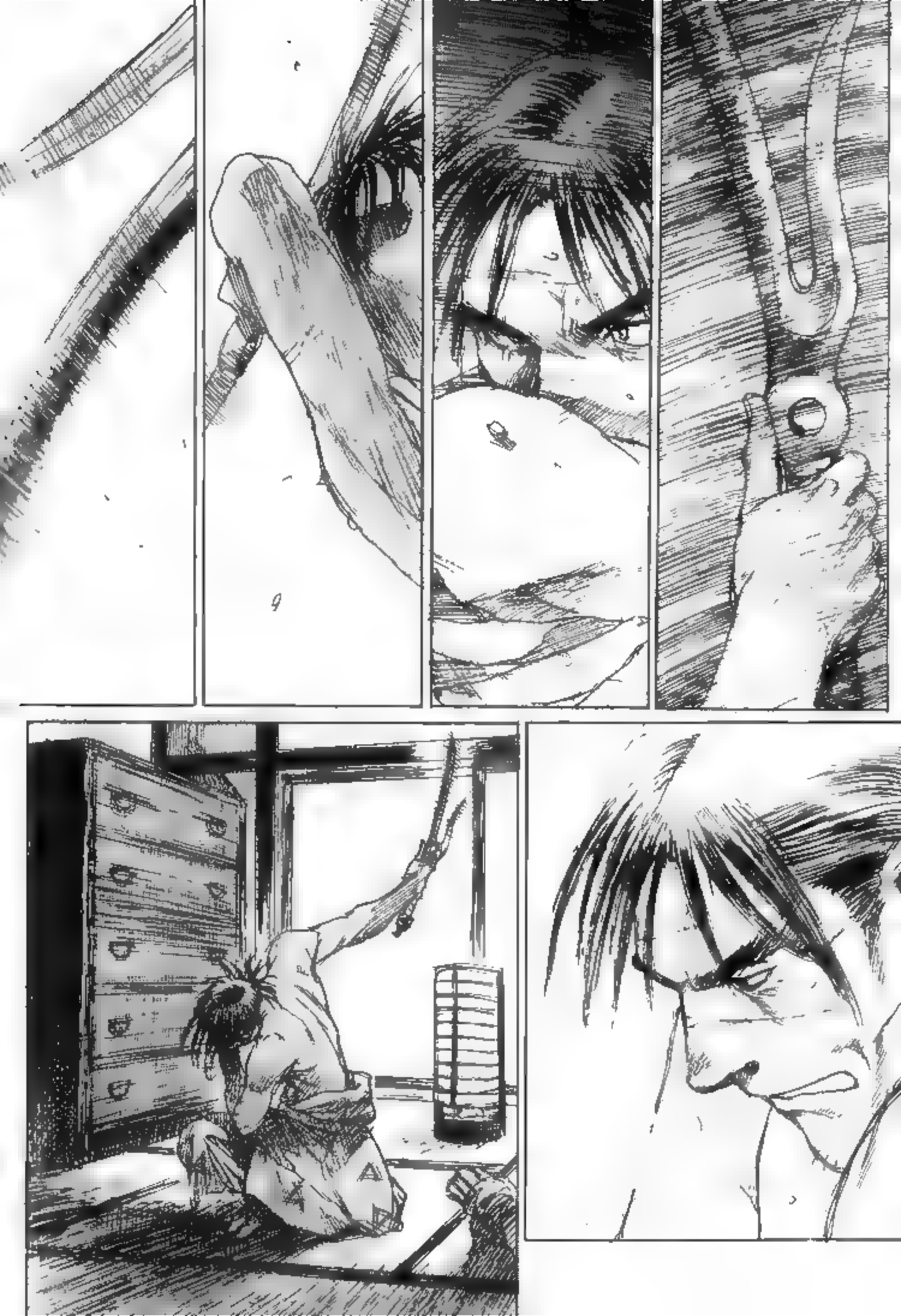
TATSU!
OUR FRIEND MANJI HERE, NOW PREPARING TO PART WAYS WITH US TOMORROW...
...WOULD LIKE TO EXPRESS HIS HEARTFELT GRATITUDE TO YOU.
HEY! I NEVER SAID THAT!
HEY, MANJI! LOOKIN' GOOD! WHAT'S UP...?
WELL, UH...
I GUESS... WHEN I WAS OUT OF IT FOR A FEW DAYS THERE, YOU... .....
YOU WERE THE ONE WHO TOOK CARE OF ME. !N, Uh... VARIOUS WAYS. AND SO...
AWW, NOTHIN' TO IT.
HEH HEH HEH!
WHAT A WONDERFUL DAUGHTER I HAVE!
JUST THINK, MANJI! SHE EVEN CLEANED UP YOUR--
SHUDDUP!

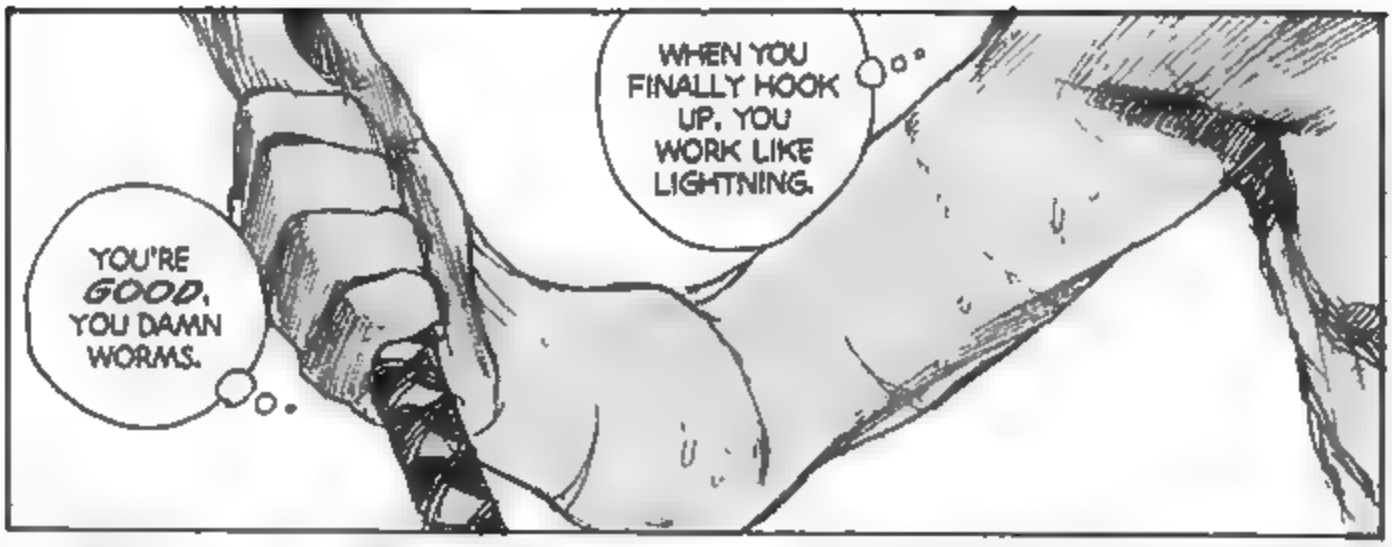
DARN IT ALL!
I TOTAL-LY FORGOT!
FORGOT WHAT?
TO AIR OUT ANOTHER FUTON.
:sniff:
UGH!
IT SMELLS ALL MUSTY.
FIGURES
WHY DO YOU NEED ANOTHER ONE?
YOU'VE ALREADY GOT THEM OUT FOR ME AND YOU AND THE SENSEI, RIGHT?
NEW GUEST?!
SOMEONE ELSE IS GOING TO BE STAYING HERE?
UH HUH.
FOR OUR NEW GUEST, OF COURSE.

WAIT A SEC... THAT'S STRANGE.
I COULD HAVE SWORN DADDY SAID HE TOLD YOU!
AH!
THERE'LL BE SOME-ONE ELSE STAYING HERE, STARTING TOMORROW.
JUST THIS GUY I HIRED. I NEED HIM FOR MY WORK.
I THOUGHT I'D PUT HIM IN HERE. YOU'LL ONLY BE NEIGHBORS FOR A NIGHT. SO TRY TO GET ALONG.
THINK YOU CAN DO THAT? FOR ONE NIGHT?
"HIRED"...? WHY--

I'VE BEEN THINKING OF DOING A SERIES OF PAINTINGS, SO I HAVE TO GO SEE MOUNT FUJI WITH MY OWN EYES.
YEAH? SO?
MANJI... USE YOUR BRAINS FOR A CHANGE.
WAIT... I GET IT. YOU NEED SOMEONE TO LOOK AFTER THE HOUSE WHILE YOU'RE OFF DOODLING, RIGHT?
RIGHT. ACTUALLY, I THOUGHT OF ASKING YOU...
...BUT I NEVER DREAMED YOU'D RECOVER SO FAST.
HEH... SORRY TO DISAP-POINT YOU.
TATSU'S HERE. WHAT'S WRONG WITH HER?
I'D WORRY ABOUT HER, HERE ALL ALONE.
I DUNNO... THE WAY I SEE IT, A CUTE YOUNG GIRL AND SOME DUDE...ALL ALONE...
DOESN'T THAT WORRY YOU EVEN MORE, "DADDY"...?

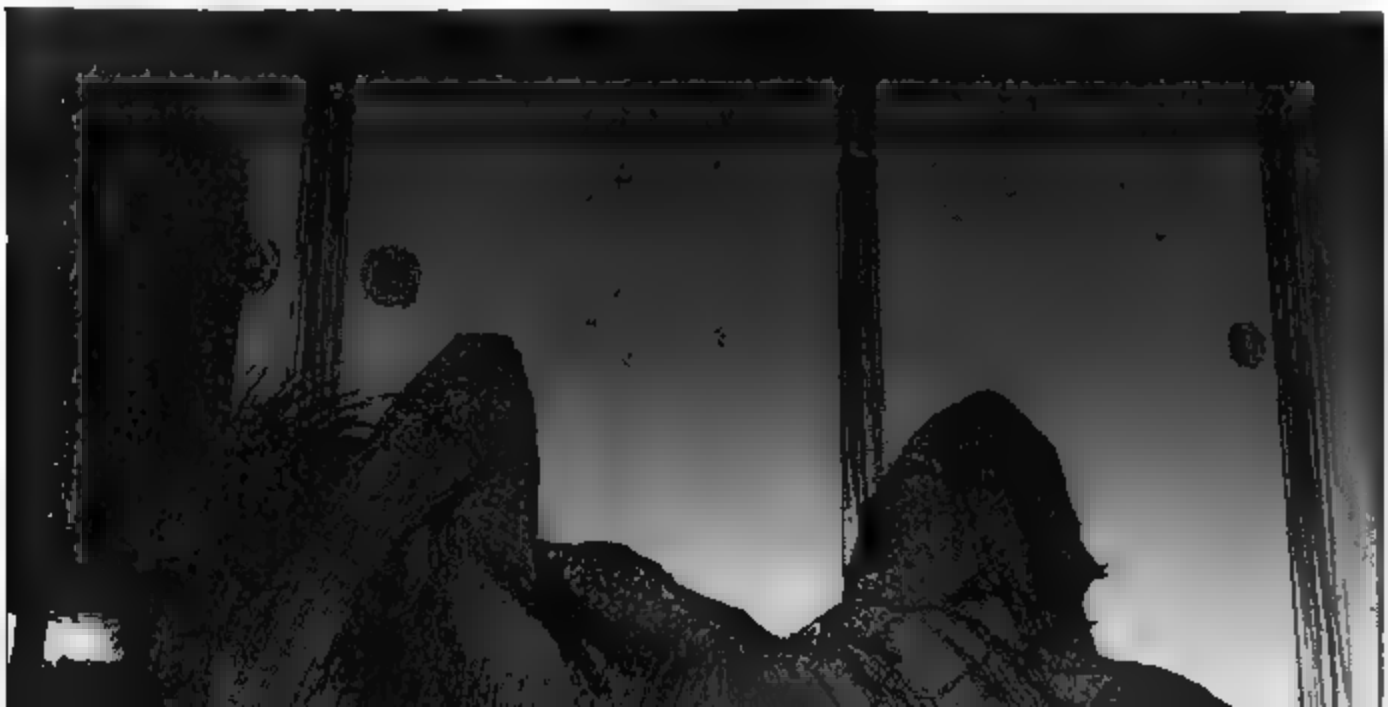
ACTUALLY, NO.
I CHECKED HIM OUT, OF COURSE.
IT SEEMS HE LOST HIS LITTLE SISTER WHEN HE WAS A KID.
AS A RESULT, HE'S ESPECIALLY PROTECTIVE OF YOUNG GIRLS... JUST LIKE YOU ARE, MM?
YEAH, WELL... Y'KNOW.
HE'S A RŌNIN, YOUNGER THAN YOU. SO EVEN IF YOU BUMP SWORDS IN THE CORRIDOR...
...NO FIGHTING! YOU HEAR ME?
YEAH, YEAH... BUT WHO'S GONNA FIGHT? MY BODY AIN'T UP TO IT...YET.
HMM... MAYBE HE DID SAY SOME-THING...
MUST BE THE SAME GUY.
HEE, HEE! HE'S SUPPOSED TO BE A TOTAL HUNK!
WELL, WELL... AREN'T YOU LUCKY?




WHEN YOU FINALLY HOOK UP, YOU WORK LIKE LIGHTNING.
YOU'RE *GOOD*, YOU DAMN WORMS.

NOT WORTH HANGING AROUND ANOTHER NIGHT.
NOT WITH THAT GUY COMING IN. I'LL HEAD OUT ONCE THEY'RE ASLEEP.

UNTIL THEN... SHUT-EYE.



SHKK
KTAK
YOU CAN PUT YOUR STUFF OVER THERE.
RIGHT. THANKS.
I'M SORRY. THE *FUTON* DIDN'T GET ENOUGH SUN...
THAT'S OKAY.
TRUST ME-- I'VE SLEPT ON WORSE, KID.
CALL ME IF YOU NEED ANY-THING.
SURE, NO PROBLEM.
OH, YEAH, ONE MORE THING...
...ABOUT THE GUY IN THE NEXT ROOM...
JUST SAY HI. HE'S OKAY.
I WANTED TO SPEAK TO YOUR FATHER AS WELL.
LEARN MY WAY AROUND THE HOUSE, THAT SORT OF THING.

I'LL LET HIM KNOW. SEE YA!
KTAK

.....!

UM... YOU, IN THERE.
...
...

IF YOU GOTTA HIT THE CAN OR SOME-THING...
...STEP RIGHT ON THROUGH. WON'T BOTHER ME.

THANK YOU KINDLY.
I'LL TRY NOT TO...
SLASH
WHAM!

……
……
……
!!
MA--

OOPS!
I FORGOT TO TELL HIM...
??
YOU'RE NOT GETTING OFF WITH JUST YOUR STOMACH *THIS* TIME, PAL!
HEY, I'M NOT THE *ONLY* ONE WHO DIDN'T DIE, DAMMIT!

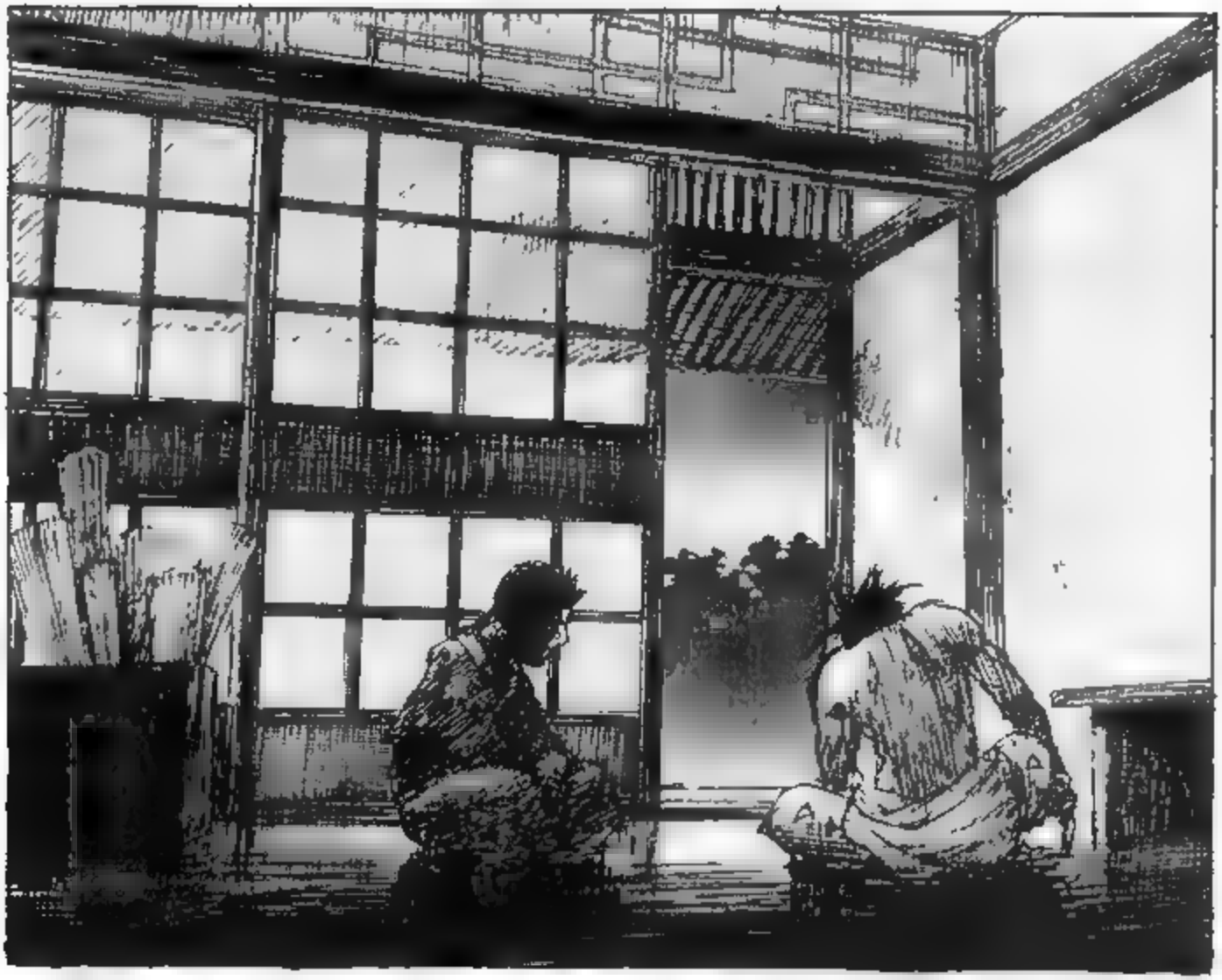
ER... WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

AH... TATSUBŌ...
WE... ER... UM...
.....
.....
.....
.....
...?
...
Uh... YEAH!
KILLING MOSQUI-TOES!
YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME!

WITH SWORDS?
YOU WANSHI ARE ALL NUTS!
SO. Uh... WHAT DO YOU WANT?
WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT?
OH, YEAH. MANJI... SEEMS LIKE YOUR WOUNDS ARE ALL HEALED...
...SO I HEATED UP THE BATH.
WHO GOES FIRST, WHO GOES SECOND... WORK IT OUT YOURSELVES, OKAY?
SURE... RIGHT... NO PROBLEM.
THAT'S ALL... SORRY TO BOTHER YOU.
NOT AT ALL, NOT AT ALL...
ONE MORE THING-- ANY FIGHTING, AND I'LL THROW YOU BOTH OUT. GOT IT?
YES, MISS!

whew..

GO AHEAD. YOU SIT, TOO.
IF YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT THE ITTŌ-RYU... FORGET IT.
I WALKED. A LONG TIME AGO.
...I JUST DON'T FEEL LIKE IT ANY-MORE.
AND REALLY...
NO REASON TO CUT YOU UP.
.....
.....



I *FIGURED* I RECOGNIZED THAT VOICE...
...BUT I THOUGHT YOU WERE *DEAD*, PAL.

THAT SHOULD BE *MY* LINE. ESPECIALLY AFTER THAT NIGHT...
...BUT ACTUALLY, I ALREADY KNEW.
SOME OF THE BOYS TOLD ME YOU WERE STILL ALIVE.

YOU WERE THE FIRST GUY TO KNOW ABOUT MY LITTLE SECRET...
...AND SURVIVE TO TALK ABOUT IT, ANYWAY.
SHIT!
AS IF YOU NEEDED THEM TO TELL YOU!

...YOU GOT *ANY* IDEA HOW MANY TIMES I'VE BEEN *CHOPPED INTO PIECES*, MAGATSU?!
AND THANKS TO YOU TELLING ALL YOUR BUDDIES ABOUT MY BODY...

SO... MANJI...
WHAT THE HELL ARE *YOU* DOING HERE?

SORRY ABOUT THAT.

BUT THAT'S ALL ANCIENT HISTORY NOW, RIGHT? FORGIVE AND FORGET?
IT WAS A *SECRET*, DAMN IT!!

DIDN'T HE TELL YOU?
HUH.
KNOW WHAT I'M THINKING, NOW? THAT SNEAKY BASTARD...HE EVEN GAVE MONEY TO RIN SO SHE COULD FINANCE HER *REVENGE*, AND ALL THE TIME HE'S TIGHT WITH THE *ITTŌ-RYŪ*.
HEH, HEH... WELL, FOR THE HONOR OF THE *SENSEI*, I'LL TELL YOU THIS.
WE FIRST MET ONLY FIVE DAYS AGO.
FIVE *DAYS* AGO...?!
YEAH. IN THIS CRUMBLING OLD TEMPLE.
A TEMPLE...?
WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU DOING THERE?
ACTUALLY... AH, HELL...
.....
.....
WHO CARES?

IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER, DOES IT?
IT'S NOT LIKE I'M SOME DAMN DISCI-PLE!
WHAT THE HELL'S HE TALKING ABOUT?
LOOK... MANJI.
RIGHT NOW I'M TRACKING THIS... CERTAIN GUY.
SO I CAN KILL HIM. IF YOU'RE WONDERING WHY I DON'T EVEN FEEL LIKE HAVING IT OUT WITH YOU, WELL...
...THAT'S THE REASON.
WHEN THIS MASTER SORI GUY HIRED ME, I ASKED HIM ABOUT THE GUY I'M LOOKING FOR...
...AND HE GOT ALL EVASIVE. SO I THOUGHT, "FINE. WORK FOR HIM A BIT, AND CHECK IT OUT."
DON'T KNOW HIS NAME, DON'T KNOW HIS FACE.
ALL I KNOW IS HE KILLED SOMEONE IMPORTANT TO ME.
SO WHO IS THE BASTARD?

A WOMAN, HUH?
YEAH. TRUE. NONE OF MY DAMN BUSINESS.
GUESS I'LL TAKE A CRAP AND SACK OUT
YES, A WOMAN, DAMN IT!
A WOMAN!
NONE OF YOUR DAMN BUSINESS.
I LIVED WITH HER AT THIS BROTHEL THE ITTŌ-RYŪ USES. SO, YEAH... SHE WAS A WORKING GIRL.
DOESN'T MATTER WHAT KIND OF SLEAZY BASTARD THEY SEND HER. IF HE'S A CUSTOMER, SHE'S GOT TO DO HER JOB.
ANYWAY... THIS SHITHEAD PINNED DOWN HER HANDS WITH A DAGGER. CUT PIECES OFF HER... IT WAS A REALLY FUCKING BAD WAY TO DIE.
I WASN'T THERE. SO I DON'T HAVE A CLUE ABOUT HIS FACE...
...BUT ONE OF THE OTHER GIRLS DREW ME THE GUY'S KIMONO.

I DON'T GET IT, MAGATSU.
WHY WOULD SOME GUY JUST UP AND KILL SOME HOOKER?
MAYBE NO REASON.
MAYBE HE'S JUST A SCUMBAG.
BUT... PROB-ABLY HE WAS AFTER ME.
AND SHE WOULDN'T SAY WHERE I WAS, EVEN UNDER TORTURE. SO HE OFFED HER.
YEAH... COULD BE. GUESS IT FITS.
SHIT... THAT'S SOME SERIOUS BAD KARMA, PAL.
I... I KNOW.
HEY! I KNOW THIS GUY!
IT'S SHIRA!

WH... WHAT?!
WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY...?!

HEH HEH HEH... EDO... IT'S A BIG TOWN...
...BUT IT'S A SMALL WORLD... RIGHT, MAGATSU?

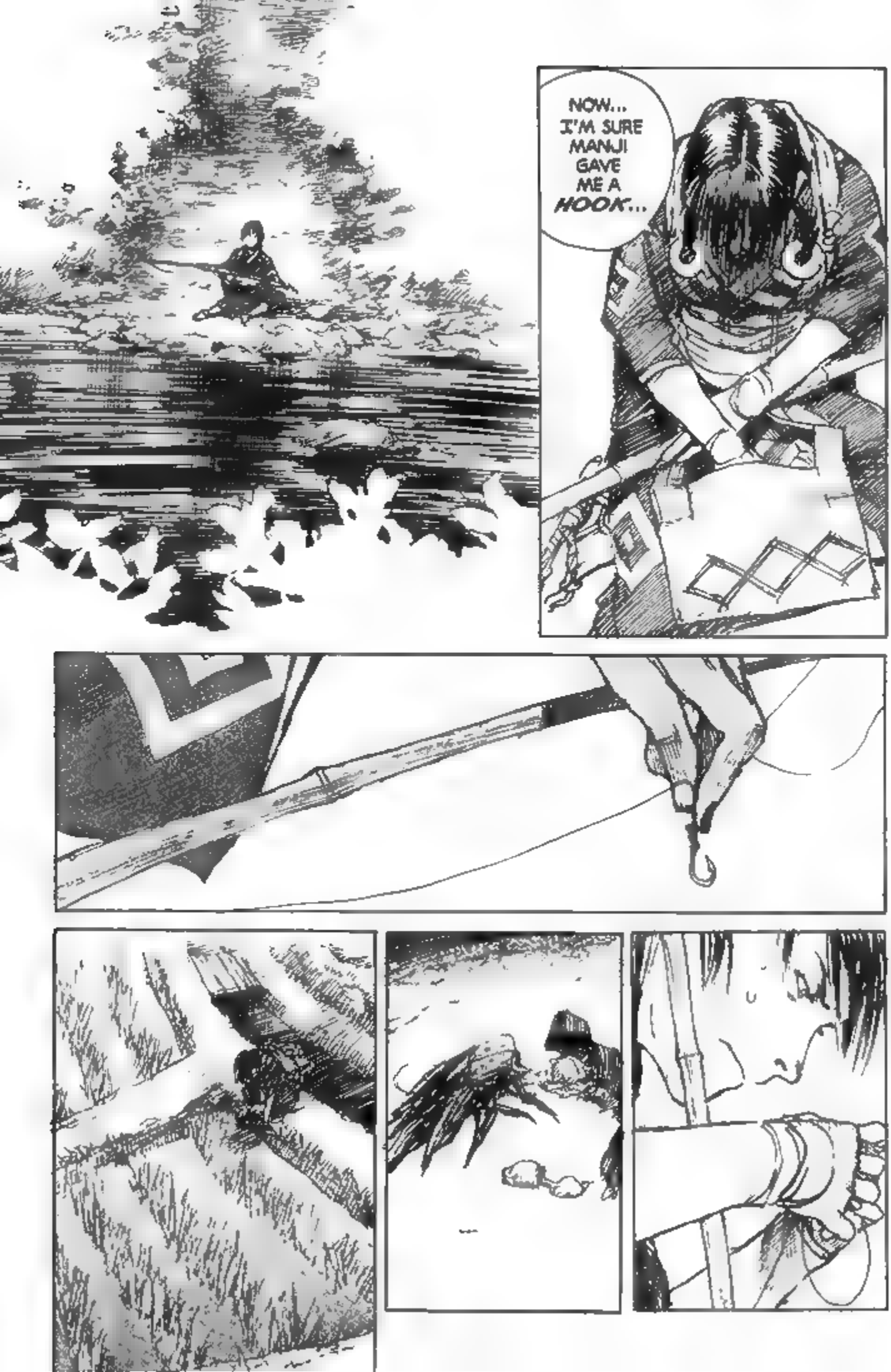
SKIN
Part 2

AH?
HEY!
HEY, YOU OKAY?!
FUWAA
ARE YOU SICK? WE'LL GET HELP...
AH... N-NO...
IT'S NO BIG DEAL. REALLY.
PLEASE. DON'T WORRY.
HA HA HA HEH

I GUESS IT'S HOPE-LESS.
IF I TRY TO TOUGH IT OUT, I'LL DROP DEAD...
GRGHVE
WAIT A SEC... DIDN'T MANJI THE MASTER TEACH ME SOMETHING USEFUL...?
SNK
PERFECT! I THINK YOU'VE GOT IT.
HEH, HEH!

YOU CAN CATCH CROWS THAT WAY, TOO.
BUT DON'T *BOTHER.* YOU CAN'T EAT 'EM ANYWAY.
'CAUSE CROW MEAT TASTES LIKE *SHIT.*
MOST OMNIVORES ARE *CRAPPY EATING.* REMEMBER THAT!
OKAY.
WHAT ELSE IS GOOD?
CICADA LARVAE.
YOU CAN FIND 'EM *EVERY-WHERE.*
DIG AROUND TREE ROOTS AND YOU CAN GRUB UP A SACKFUL IN AN HOUR.
WRAP 'EM UP IN A *SHISO* LEAF AND TOAST 'EM IN THE COALS FOR A BIT, AND THEY'RE NOT HALF BAD.
SOME LIKE 'EM. SOME DON'T

YOU USED TO BE A COP, RIGHT?
WHERE'D YOU LEARN ALL THIS SURVIVAL STUFF?
WALK LIKE A DUCK, RIGHT? PULLED THE WOOL OVER THEIR EYES.
BEFORE MY BOSS PICKED ME OUT, I LIVED LIKE A MOUNTAIN MONKEY.
YOU'RE NOT "LITTLE MISS SWORD SCHOOL" ANYMORE, REMEMBER.
SOMEDAY IT MIGHT COME IN HANDY, THIS SORT A STUFF.
RIGHT...!


NOW... I'M SURE MANJI GAVE ME A HOOK...

OKAY!
LET'S GO FISHING!

WHRAK
AH...?!

WOW... NO GEAR, NOTHING.
AND BAM! DINNER!
EVEN SO... PRETTY COOL!
LIKE THAT ONE BY WHERE WE'RE STAYING.
CAN'T ALWAYS FIND BIG ENOUGH ROCKS IN LITTLE STREAMS.
WELL, CHOKE IT DOWN. WE'RE LEAVING.
HEY, WAIT! I'M NOT DONE YET!
ANYWAY, DON'T FORGET THIS TRICK.

LET'S SEE...
TAKE A ROCK ABOUT THIS BIG...
...AND DROP IT ON ONE ABOUT THAT BIG.
ONE... TWO...
HUNF!
HUH...?
THUD!

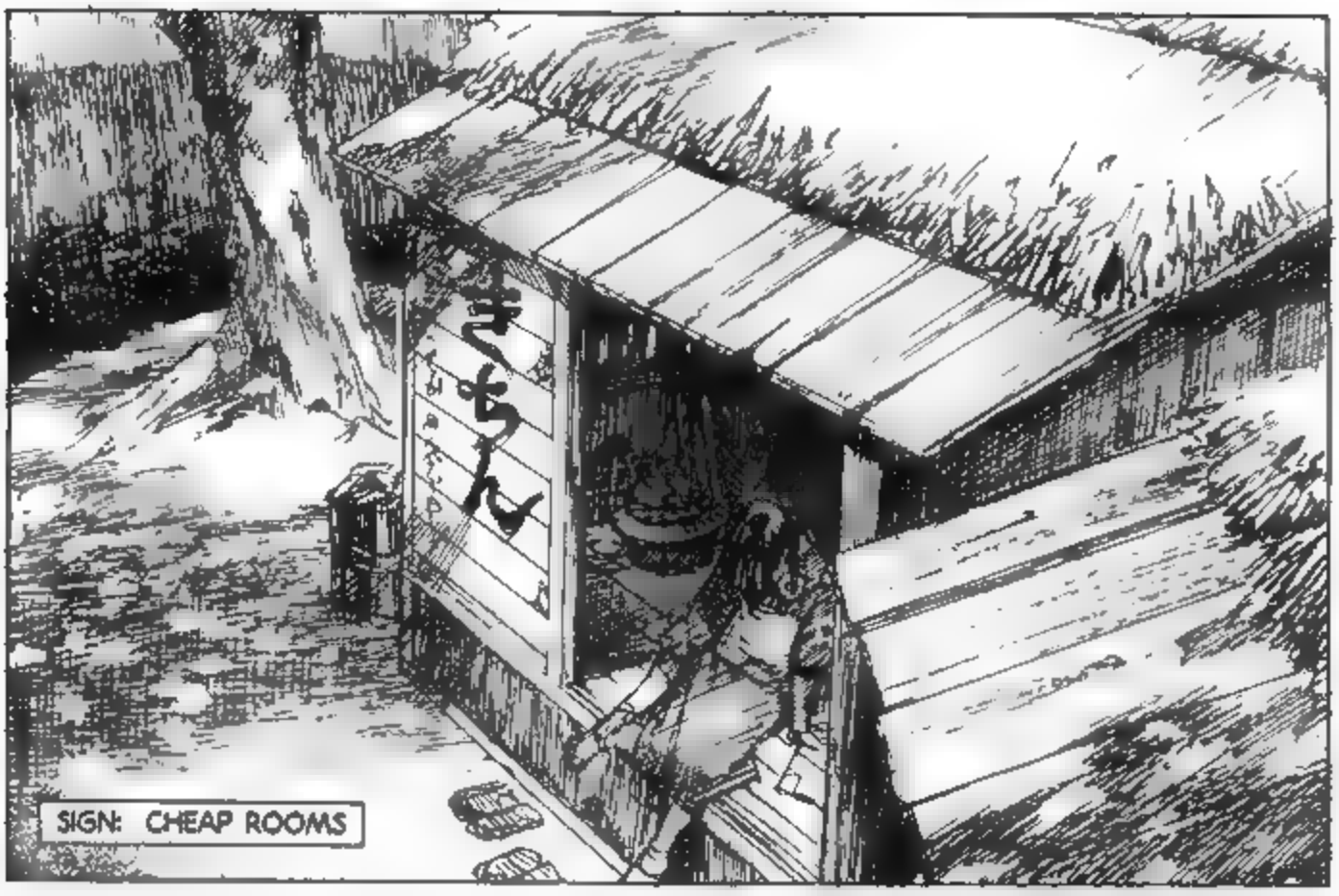
NNGHH...
MNNPH!

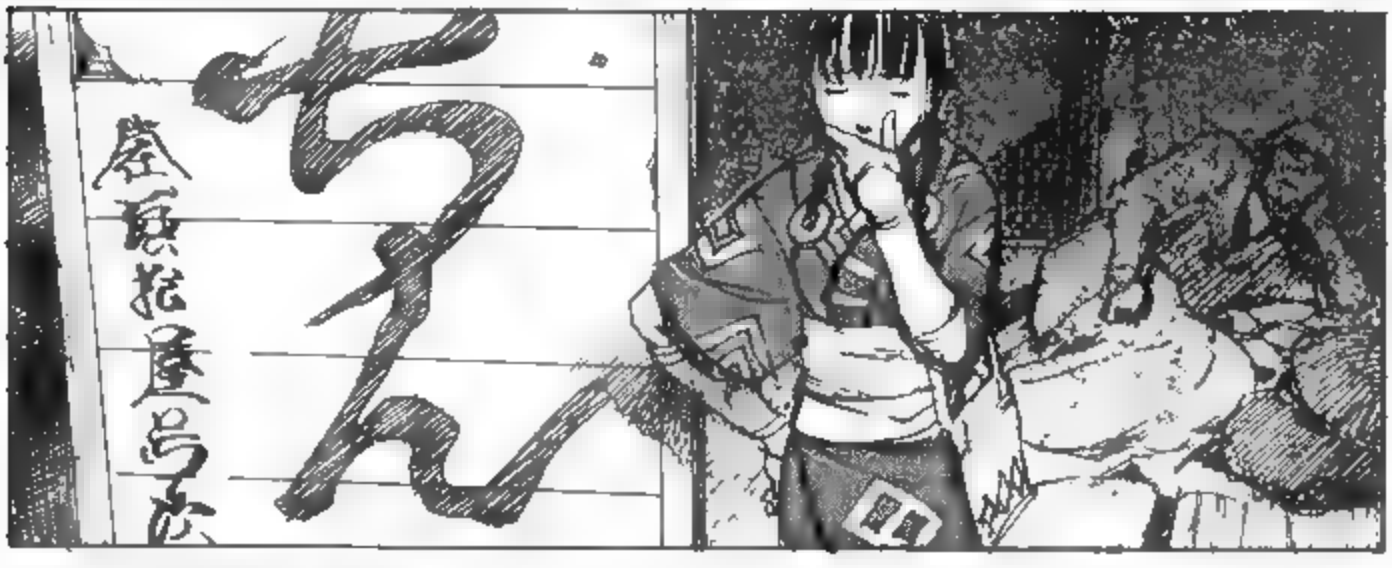
ONE...
MORE...
TRY!

OOP...?!

KALOOSH

:UHF:
ER... EXCUSE ME?
HAVE YOU... UM... GOT ANY RICE LEFT...?


きちん
SIGN: CHEAP ROOMS



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FIGURES. FLOP-HOUSES...
...ARE JUST FLEA NESTS!

GUESS I'M JUST... I DUNNO... SHOWING OFF.
THAT'S ALL.
BUT SOMEHOW I FEEL ASHAM-ED...
...TO WASTE THE ELEVEN RYŌ SATO LEFT ME.
BUT... FLOP-HOUSES? EATING ON SIXTEEN MON A DAY?
I'VE TRIED LOTS OF THINGS...
BUT... IT'S ALL WRONG.
THE WRONG KIND OF PRIDE.

NOTHING WILL CHANGE...
...UNTIL I OWN MY POWERLESS-NESS, I'LL NEVER BECOME ME.
RIGHT, THEN!
SWISH
FROM NOW ON, I STAY AT CLEAN INNS!
ONES WITH BATHS!!
THREE SQUARE MEALS A DAY!
BIG ONES!
AND WHEN I SLEEP, SLEEP LIKE THE DEAD! LIKE MANJI!
R... RIGHT.
LIKE... MANJI.

INSTEAD OF TRAVEL-ING LIKE A BEGGAR, PLAYING THE GAME LIKE HIM WHEN HE'S NOT EVEN HERE...
...I'LL JUST POLISH OFF THIS ADA-UCHI STUFF, AND BOUNCE ON HOME!
THAT'S MORE LIKE IT, AND A...
AH...
AH
CHOO!
sniff THIS WATER'S COLD!
SPLISH

WHOOPS!
Uh...
ER...
D-DON'T GET ME WRONG! I'M OKAY! HONEST!
I WASN'T PEEPING! NOT ME! WOULDN'T THINK OF IT, I SWEAR!

SO, Uh... DON'T BE AFRAID.
I JUST... LIVE AROUND HERE.
WAS OUT IN THE WOODS, HEARD A WOMAN'S VOICE, AND... Y'KNOW...
SHEESH... I, I'M SORRY. I'LL JUST DISAP-PEAR.
ENJOY YOUR BATH!
.....
.....

Whew!

Er... MISS...?
YOU'RE A TRAVEL-ER... RIGHT?

UM... Y-YES.

THOUGHT SO... BUT...
I FIGURE YOU'RE NEW AT IT... YEAH?

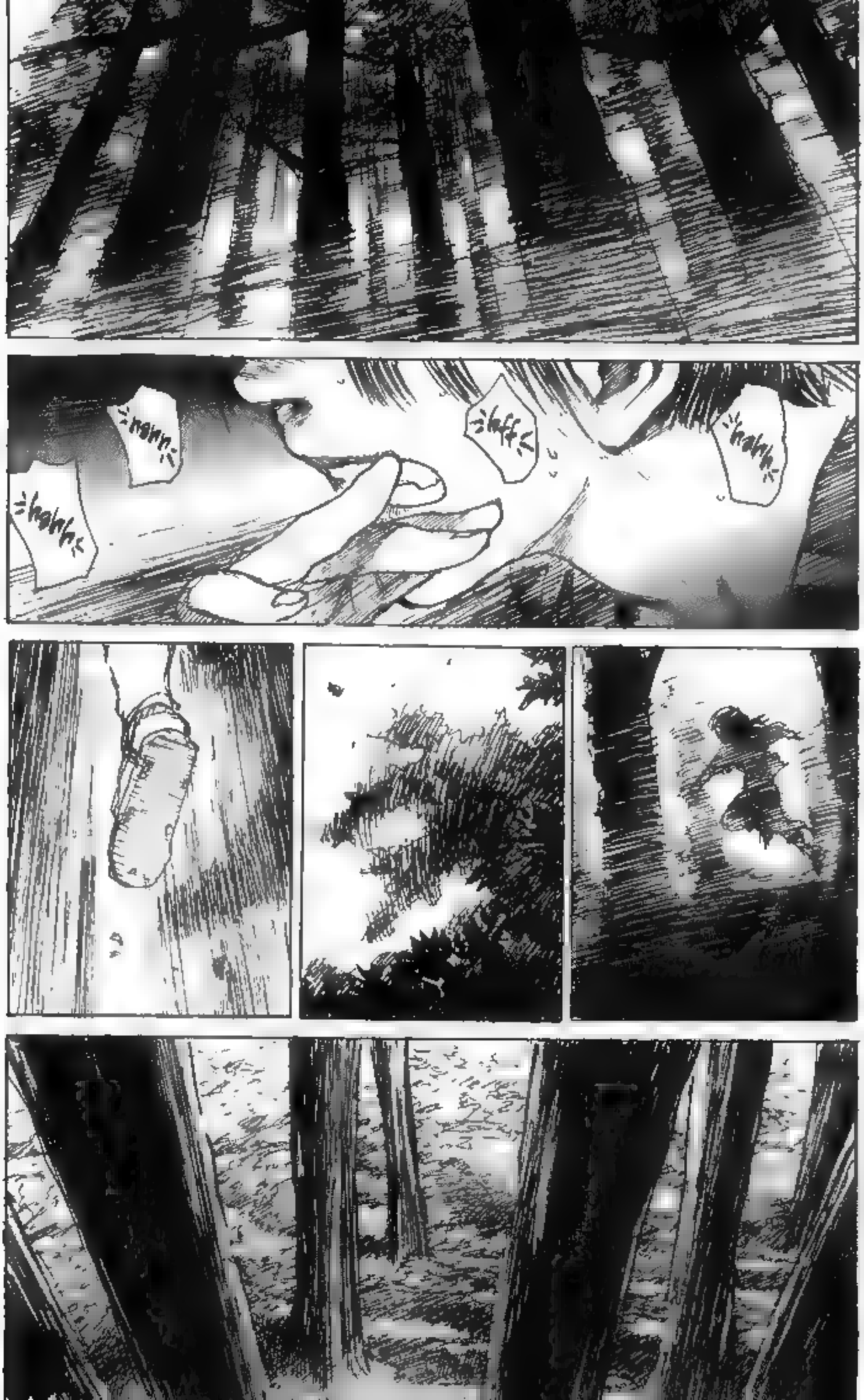
EITHER THAT-- OR YOU WERE BORN PRETTY RICH.
...?
CAME UP FROM KURIHARA, DID YOU?
Y... YES.
THOUGHT SO. IT ALWAYS HAPPENS AT THIS POOL HERE.
POOR FOLK WHO CRASHED AT SOME KURIHARA FLOP-HOUSE...
...STOP HERE TO WASH OFF ALL THE CRITTERS THEY PICKED UP FROM THE FUTON.
BUT, Y'KNOW... YOU GET OTHER FOLK OUT HERE. SORTA, PICKING UP WHAT OTHER FOLK DROP.
FOLK WITH STICKY FINGERS, SO TO SPEAK... LOTS OF 'EM AROUND HERE, SORRY TO SAY.

THIS STUFF HERE... IT'S *YOURS*, RIGHT?
EH?! *YES!*
SO ANYONE WHO'S SPENT EVEN A BIT OF TIME TRAVELING *POOR*...
...THEY TIE UP THEIR KIMONO AND *EVERYTHING*, AND CARRY IT ON THEIR *HEADS* WHEN THEY TAKE A DIP. JUST COMMON SENSE.
I... I *WILL!* THANK YOU FOR YOUR ADVICE, SIR!!
WELL, YOU BETTER COME GET IT AS SOON AS I LEAVE.
IT'S AS GOOD AS *ASKING* FOLK TO *HELP THEM-SELVES*.
WELL, I GUESS...
...I'LL BE *GOING*.

.....
.....!
OH, GAWD...!
WAS I SCARED OR WHAT!
THANK GOODNESS HE WAS NICE.
I BETTER DO WHAT HE SAID.

OOPS.
HE'S RIGHT. THAT WAS TOO STUPID.
...IF SOMEONE HAD RIPPED OFF MY STUFF, I'D BE FINISH-ED.
LESSON LEARNED-- DON'T LET IT OUT OF YOUR SIGHT AGAIN!
EVEN IF THIS IS MY LAST DAY WASHING OUT-DOORS...

SO... DAY THREE.
I ALREADY BOUGHT LUNCH.
I CAN MAKE TEN *R/* BEFORE SUNDOWN.
AND *THEN*...
!?!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G...
GONE.
.....
.....

WHAT WAS THAT?
I SAID, I BET YOU'RE PISSED OFF...

...THAT I TEAMED UP TO BUMP OFF YOUR DEAR LEADER.
RIGHT...?

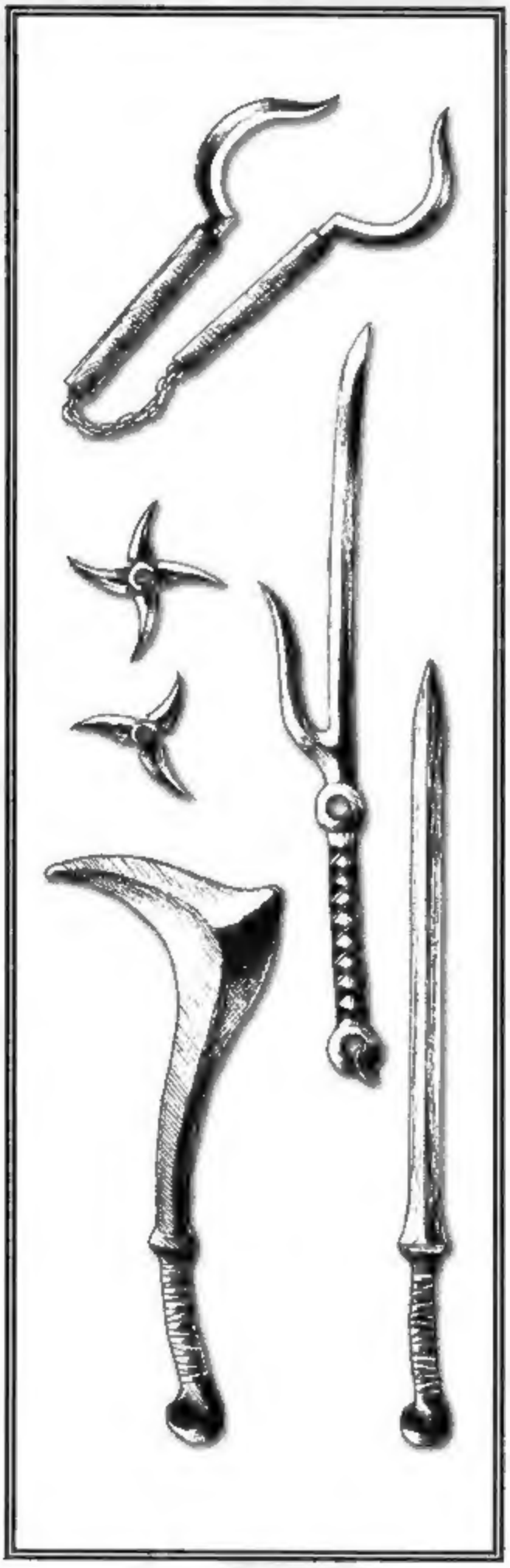
YOU MEAN ANOTSU?
WHY WOULD I BE? HE'S THE HEAD OF THE ITTŌ-RYŪ-- LOTS OF PEOPLE ARE TRYING TO OFF HIM. IT COMES WITH THE TERRITORY.
AND LIKE I ALREADY SAID...
...I'M DONE WITH THEM.
SO DO WHAT YOU LIKE. I DON'T GIVE A SHIT.
GUESS I'LL BELIEVE YOU.
ONLY... LISTENING TO YOU NOW... I WANT TO KNOW ONE THING.
THAT SHIRA BASTARD... IT SOUNDS LIKE HE'S YOUR PAL OR SOMETHING.
LOOK. WE TEAMED UP TO GET ANOTSU. WE FAILED, THINGS WENT BAD, AND WE SPLIT UP. PERIOD.
HOW MANY PEOPLE HE KILLED BEFORE OR AFTER...? WHO THE HELL KNOWS?

IT'S BEEN TEN YEARS SINCE THIS PEASANT BOY KNOCKED ON THE ITTŌ-RYŪ'S DOOR...
...MANJI.
I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT SAMURAI ETIQUETTE. BUT IN TEN YEARS I THINK I'VE LEARNED...
...WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A KENSHI.
YOU WEAR A TOOL FOR KILLING PEOPLE IN YOUR BELT...
...AND YOU ACCEPT THE RISK OF GETTING KILLED YOURSELF.
THE GUYS YOU WHACKED. KUROI... SHIZUMA... EVEN HIGA. I FIGURE THEY WERE PREPARED FOR THAT.
SO I'M NOT GOING TO HATE YOU FOR TAKING THEIR LIVES. ITTŌ-RYŪ OR NOT, THEY KNEW THE RULES. PLAYED BY THEM.
BUT THERE ARE BASTARDS OUT THERE WHO DON'T.
JUST PURE MURDEROUS SCUM THAT MAKE YOU WANT TO PUKE YOUR GUTS OUT.

SO... WANT TO TAG ALONG?
EH, KID?
I DON'T KNOW WHERE SHIRA'S AT *NOW*...
...BUT HE'S GOTTA BELIEVE I'M HEADED FOR *KAGA*.
THAT SHIRA... NOW *THERE'S* A DUDE WHO HOLDS A GRUDGE.
HE'LL *NEVER* FORGIVE THE GUY WHO *CUT OFF HIS HAND*.

Y'KNOW, I DON'T REALLY HAVE THE TIME TO BE SCREWING AROUND LIKE THIS.
OH, YEAH... HE'LL SHOW UP. I GUARAN-TEE IT.
BUT JUST THIS ONCE, MAGATSU TAITO...
...I'LL HELP YOU TAKE REVENGE!
AIN'T LIKE SHE'S GONNA COME BACK TO LIFE.

GLOSSARY



ada-uchi: an act of private vengeance, similar to 19th Century duels of honor. Such revenge was legal if approved by the proper authorities.

banshi: samurai manning a *sekisho* (checkpoint)

bugyō: a high-ranked samurai in charge of keeping the peace, with the help of the men under his command and volunteer "posse" members

dango: small balls of sweet rice paste skewered on a stick, sometimes topped with sweet bean paste or a soy sauce glaze

dōjō: a hall for martial arts training; here centers for swordsmanship

Edo: capital of pre-modern Japan, later renamed Tokyo

han: a feudal domain

Ittō-ryū: the radical sword school of Anotsu Kagehisa

Kaga: a remote feudal domain on the Japan Sea coast southwest of Edo

kenshi: a swordsman (or swordswoman), not necessarily born into the samurai caste

kessen-chu: mystical bloodworms that can heal all wounds and grant their host immortality

mon: a small coin

Mugai-ryū: sword school of the Akagi assassins; literally, "without form"

ri: unit of measurement equivalent to 3.9 kilometers (approximately 2.4 miles)

rōnin: a masterless samurai

ryo: a gold piece

sekisho: checkpoint regulating travel from Edo to other *han* (feudal domains). All travelers had to submit papers at official checkpoints along the main highways into and out of Edo.

sensei: a teacher, a master

Shingyōtō-ryū: a variety of swordsmanship

tatami: a thick, rice straw mat used as flooring in traditional Japanese households, still commonly found in at least one room of a residence even today

tegata (tsūkō tegata): official travel pass for transiting *sekisho*

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